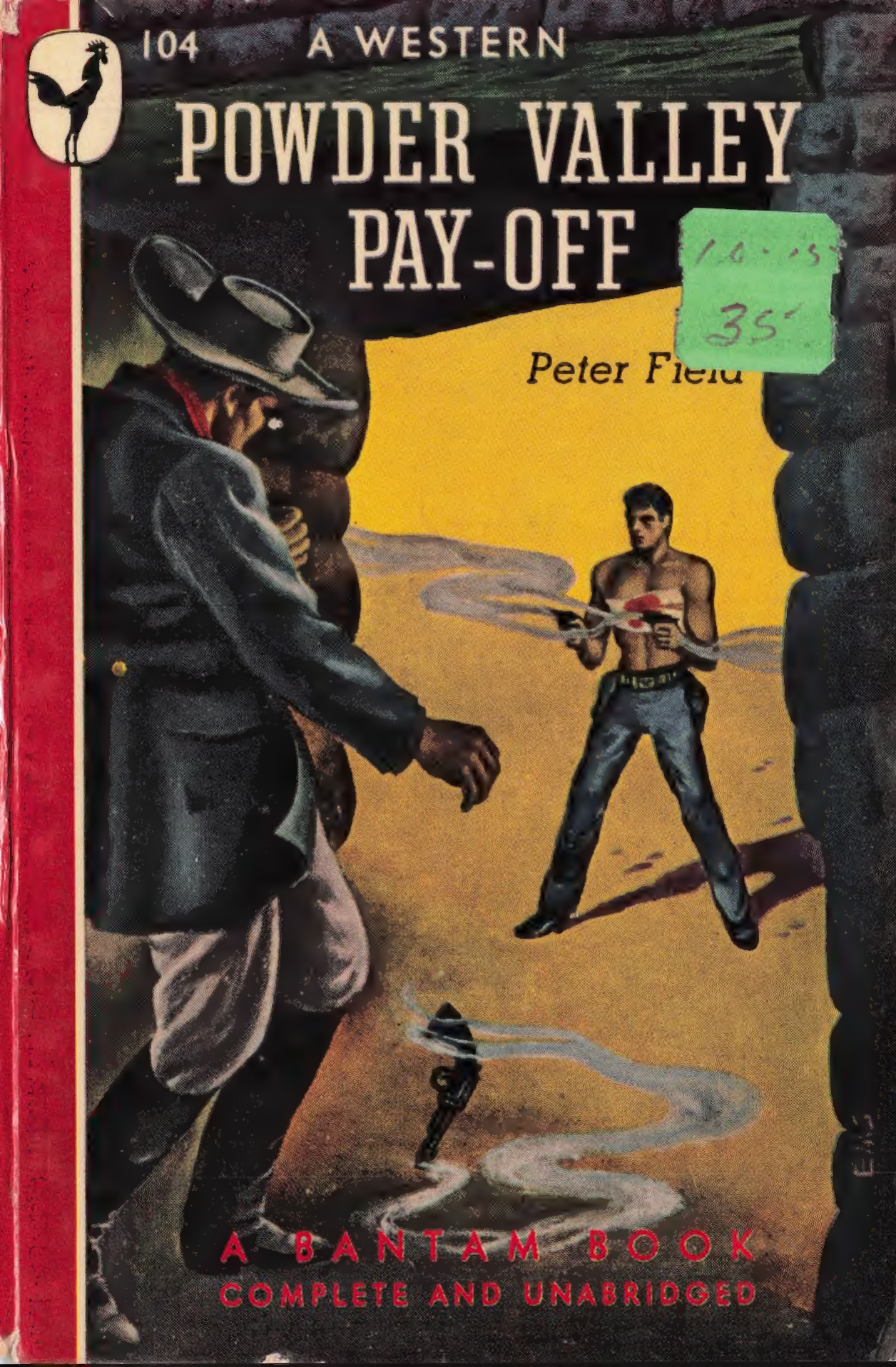
104 A WESTERN
POWDER VALLEY PAY-OFF
Peter Field
A BANTAM BOOK
COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

About

Powder Valley Pay-off

Suppose you had sold a herd of horses to one of the shrewdest traders in Colorado—and a short while later the horses died mysteriously . . .

Then, you go to see the buyer (who is swearing vengeance on you) to try to square yourself —and discover that you're not only suspected of slick-dealing but you're also wanted for murder . . .

Now, you're really in a tough spot! To save yourself you have to find the criminal . . .

That's what happens to one-eyed Ezra and his side-kick, Sam. After they tell Pat their troubles, the three friends ride and shoot their way out of the worst mess they've been in yet.

POWDER VALLEY PAY-OFF

BY PETER FIELD

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POWDER VALLEY
PAY-OFF

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Pat Stevens, of Powder Valley, came out of retirement to save his friends, Sam and Ezra, from a murder charge.

Ezra, one-eyed giant, could shoot pure flame from his one eye when he was riled.

Sam Sloan, short, stocky and courageous. He just couldn't keep out of trouble.

Silas Wackett, the shrewdest horse trader in Colorado, accused Sam and Ezra of selling him a bunch of sick horses.

Joan Wackett, his tall, supple, red-haired daughter.

Tad Grayson, Joan's stocky blond suitor, had something on his mind.

Sally Stevens, Pat's faithful wife, was ready to hit the outlaw trail with him.

Dad Cargat, gabby old storekeeper, talked himself into some serious trouble with one-eyed Ezra.

ONE

SAM SLOAN had just asked the bartender for directions to the Crooked Cross ranch up on the Escondido River. The bartender was an old man with a long lugubrious face. His bald head gleamed yellowish in the light of a kerosene lamp hanging from a rafter, and from cavernous sockets small blue eyes peered out craftily at Sam and his companion.

"Would you two fellers be them crooked hawse-traders from down Powder Valley way that hooked Ol' Man Wackett to a fare-you-well last month?" he questioned.

One-eyed Ezra started forward angrily as the insulting query fell from the bartender's lips. Sam nudged his companion hard and hastily interposed, "We're from Powder Valley an' we sold Wackett some hawses last month. As fer hookin' him on the deal, I don't reckon that's none of nobody's business."

The bartender threw back his head and cackled with huge enjoyment. "Got Silas all worked up into a dither, that trade has," he chortled. "He's bin swearin' around town that he was gonna make you fellers make good on them hawses that up an' died on him or he'd have the law on you."

A deep growl of anger welled up from Ezra's throat. His one eye glittered malevolently and he thumped two big fists on the bar. "My pardner asked for directions on how we reached the Crooked Cross ranch, not for yore palaver," he growled.

Sam and Ezra were the only occupants of the saloon. They were more than a hundred miles from Powder Valley, in a country that was completely strange to them. It was late, and this crossroads bar was the only

place where they could hope to get any information to guide them to their destination.

Sam put his hands on his hips and glared up angrily at the mountainous Ezra. "Shet yore trap," he gritted. "Cain't you keep yore big nose outta trouble jest onct in yore life? I ain't honin' none to sleep on the trail tonight. We cain't be but a little way from the Crooked Cross."

The bartender chuckled acidly again. "That's right, stranger. 'Tain't but a few miles, but if yo're lookin' fer a place to bunk I shore wouldn't advise you to keep ridin' in that direction. Silas Wackett's more likely to welcome you with a double-barreled shotgun 'stead of a bunk."

"We ain't," said Sam, "askin' yore advice. We're askin' the way."

"Silas Wackett," said the old man with relish, "has got a repytashun fer bein' the slickest hawse-trader in Colorado. When you-all sold him that herd of sick stuff that up an' died a week after he got 'em it was the fust time he'd bin beat in a hawse-trade in twenty years. I'm tellin' yuh, he's shootin' mad."

One of Ezra's big hands shot forward and the fingers opened to grip the man's scrawny throat. In the flickering light of the lantern the big man's face looked like something you see in the middle of a bad dream. Convulsed with anger, the old jagged scar on his cheek showed blood-red, and the lid of his sightless eye quivered up and down over the empty socket.

"Them hawses wa'n't sick when we sold 'em. 'Tain't our fault if they cotched somethin' an' died while they was being drove up. Was it?" he thundered, emphasizing his words with a tremendous shake of his hand that waggled the old man's head as though it were attached to his body by a piece of string.

A choked gurgle was the only reply from the old

man. His face was turning a ghastly white and his sunken eyes glittered as they rolled about wildly.

Sam Sloan was beating a tattoo on his partner's bulging biceps. "Let go, Ezra. Turn him loose, you damn fool. Wanta choke him plumb to death?"

"I'd just as lief. Why doesn't he answer me?"

"He can't." Sam was jumping up and down excitedly. "Turn loose his neck, you lunkhead, an' maybe he will answer you."

Ezra hadn't thought about that. He relaxed his hold, and the bartender tottered back against the shelf holding an assortment of bottles, and his thin hands clawed at his throat while he gasped for breath.

With an angry imprecation at Ezra for his impetuousness, Sam vaulted over the bar and snatched up a bottle of whisky. He pounded the old man on the back and held the mouth of the bottle to his lips.

The bartender swallowed feebly, then bent double and began retching violently.

Ezra's anger deserted him as suddenly as it had come. He began whooping with laughter, exclaiming, "That did it, by golly. One swaller of that rotgut he sells an' he's about to vomit up his guts. Give him another drink, Sam. Serves him damn well right."

Sam vaulted back over the counter and glared up at the huge red-headed man. In a voice that shook with wrath, he declared, "I dunno why I trail around with you, Ezra. I swear to God I don't. Of all the crazy dang galoots I ever seen, yo're the wust by a mile."

"Ho-ho-ho," Ezra continued to laugh uncontrollably. "Cain't take his own pizen." He slapped his thigh resoundingly with an open palm, then went off into another paroxysm of mirth.

The bartender had got his breath again. He backed away from Ezra, shaking his head and studying the big man with fear-filled eyes.

"Does he get took like that often, Mister?"

"Only when the moon's near full," Sam reassured him. "You still ain't answered my question."

"That's right. That's right, I shore ain't. The Crooked Cross, huh? Right on up this road that follers the creek. 'Bout three miles the road branches where there's three cottonwoods. Take the branch across the creek an' you'll come to the ranch 'bout half a mile on."

Ezra was beginning to control his laughter. He planted both big hands flat on the bar and his one eye stalked the old man relentlessly. "You still claim we pulled a crooked hawse-sellin' deal?"

"I ain't claimin' nothing. I never meant it that way. I was jest saying what I've bin hearin'. Silas Wackett's bin squawkin' his head off an' swearin' he'd get even."

"C'mon." Sam turned away, yanked at Ezra's arm.

Moonlight silvered the crossroads outside the saloon. Beyond the road was the gurgle of a mountain stream hidden from view by a heavy growth of alders. They mounted their trail-dusty horses while Ezra growled doggedly, "You know as good as me them hawses wasn't sick when the Crooked Cross riders drove 'em out of our corral. I ain't gonna let no man . . ."

"You're gettin' too old for such kid stuff," Sam interrupted shortly. He spurred his shaggy bay away into the moonlit night and Ezra followed. "We made this ride up here jest to square things with Wackett. Even if 'twasn't our fault . . ."

Ezra's thunderous laughter interrupted him. The big man was rocking back and forth in his saddle, shaken with sudden mirth. "Gettin' sick on his own whisky," he managed to jerk out. "Oh-ho-ho, Sam, I never saw nothin' so doggone funny in all my born days."

Sam rode on at a slow trot, his swarthy face showing glum in the moonlight. He was a short, stocky man,

with a hooked nose that had been broken in a youthful fight. This was a trip that neither of them relished, but they relished less the stories that had been dribbling back into Powder Valley since they had sold Silas Wackett a string of saddle horses a month previously. The animals had not only all succumbed to a mysterious ailment soon after arriving at the Crooked Cross ranch, but rumor had it that many of Wackett's horses had caught the disease from them and died also.

It was very puzzling to Sam and Ezra. They were positive the stock had been sound and healthy when they left Powder Valley, and it wasn't their fault if they had caught some disease on the trail. But they didn't like the implication that they had been involved in a dishonest deal, and they were on their way to see Wackett and explain the truth to him.

Years ago, neither Sam nor Ezra would have minded such charges at all. They would have dismissed them lightheartedly, for in their wild past they had actually been guilty of many things worse than making a slick horse trade.

There had been three of them in those younger and wilder days when they had roamed the frontiers of the West athirst for excitement and adventure. Pat Stevens had rounded out the trio, a gun-swift and daring youngster to whom the other two had both looked for leadership. Nothing had been too dangerous for them to tackle in those days, and legends had mushroomed up about their exploits.

In the beginning they had turned to the tracking down of criminals purely for the love of adventure and the hope of collecting reward money posted on the heads of the better-known desperadoes—then had come that memorable cleanup of Powder Valley which had left Pat Stevens, married to beautiful blond Sally, a ranch-owner and expectant father.

Deprived of Pat's leadership, Sam and Ezra had found themselves unable to turn back to their former ways alone, and had compromised by settling on a ranch of their own in Powder Valley not too far from the Lazy Mare Ranch owned by Pat.

Since that time, on only a few notable occasions had the trio buckled on their guns again to go in pursuit of desperadoes who threatened the security of the valley. All three were now responsible citizens and landowners, and that was why the unjust accusations against Sam and Ezra in the matter of the horse trade had brought them all the way from Powder Valley to clear it up.

They had agreed they could do no less than ride up to see Wackett and lay the true facts before him. Before leaving home they had shaken hands and solemly agreed they would hold a tight rein on their tempers and not allow any harsh words from the irascible rancher to provoke them to anger. Yet, curiously enough and without discussing their intentions to each other, when they mounted and rode away into the mountains each was wearing his cartridge belt and ancient .45, and beneath the left leg of each rider was a short-barreled saddle gun snugly ensconced in a leather boot.

Now, with the end of the long ride in sight, a certain tension gripped them both. The words of the old bartender had disturbed them more than they cared to admit. They knew Silas Wackett only slightly, had met him for the first time while he was on his horse-buying trip through the valley, and knew little of his true character. If the bartender was correct in warning them of the reception they might expect at the Crooked Cross, they foresaw that their mission might not be as simple and peaceable as they had anticipated.

Yet they rode on through the night grimly. They could not turn back now. Their honor demanded that

they see Wackett and try to convince him that they had not intentionally sold him a herd of sick horses. If he refused to accept the truth, well . . . they would have tried.

The outline of three huge, gnarled cottonwoods growing close together on the left bank of the gurgling stream showed in the moonlight ahead. Sam reined his horse up, muttering aloud, "I reckon this is where we cross the creek." It was the first word either had spoken since riding away from the saloon.

Close beside him and towering above him, Ezra nodded his head. "I reckon so," he rumbled. "Yonder looks like a turn-off." As they moved forward again, he ventured hesitantly, "I'm right sorry I jumped that old coot back yonder, Sam. But he got me plumb riled up by his loose talk."

Sam sighed and reined his horse aside into the shallow rippling stream, letting him lower his head to drink noisily.

"Don't know's I blame you," he admitted. "Only that ain't the right way fer us to handle this, Ezra. If we go off half-cocked, an' the old man shoots off his mouth . . . then we ain't never gonta get this misunderstandin' cleared up an' people are gonta call us slickers all up an' down the line."

"Yeh. We shore cain't afford them kind of repytashuns," Ezra agreed solemnly. "Fust thing you know Sally Stevens'll be sayin' we ain't no fit companions fer Dock to go visit."

"Pat too," Sam growled. "He's got so dang respectable I heard he was figgerin' on settin' hisself up for the job of deacon in the church in Dutch Springs . . .when they get around to buildin' a church."

"Yep," Ezra agreed cheerfully, "Pat'd be plumb ashamed of us if he thought we pulled a crooked trick like sellin' some sick hawses. Le's be ridin' an' get it all

cleared up. There's a light showin' through the trees ahaid. That'll be the Crooked Cross, I reckon."

They spurred their mounts on across the creek and up the rocky bank. The horses snorted and tossed their heads as they smelled the welcome odor of other horses and feed bins ahead, and broke into a jumpy gallop with no urging from their riders.

Lighted windows were blurred through the limbs of trees as they approached up the wooded slope, then the sprawling ranch house came into clear view when they passed into a wide clearing.

It was nearly midnight, but all the front windows glowed with light, and even the rectangle of the front door showed that it stood wide open as though to welcome them.

In the moonlight, corrals and sheds could be seen some distance down the slope, and even at night it was possible to see that the Crooked Cross must be quite a large spread.

They rode directly toward the lighted main ranch building, slowing their horses to a trot while Sam muttered under his breath, "All lit up like a Christmas tree, b'golly. Like maybe Mr. Wackett knowed we was comin' tonight."

"He couldn't," Ezra grunted. "We never told nobody."

They pulled their horses up ten feet from the open front door and sat in the saddles for a moment, with an inexplicable and eerie feeling of hesitancy preventing them from dismounting.

No one came to the door to greet them. No single sound came from the huge lighted house.

"Maybe," said Sam, in a hoarse whisper, "they didn't hear us ridin' up."

"Maybe not." Ezra spoke loudly, then lifted his voice

in a rumbling shout, "Hello there, inside. You got visitors."

The utter silence that answered his hail was uncanny. Sam shivered and then slid out of the saddle. He said evenly, "I don't like the looks of this," and advanced with jingling spurs toward the open front door.

Ezra's bootheels thudded loudly on the gravel walk behind him. The big man bumped into Sam and knocked him forward as he stopped abruptly on the threshold.

Sam uttered an alarmed expletive and stumbled, then leaped adroitly aside and Ezra saw what had stopped him.

A limp figure lay outstretched on the floor just inside the door. Silas Wackett's open, sightless eyes stared upward at him. His gray whiskers waved lazily in the breeze that came in through the door. A pool of blood had spread on the bare planking beneath the aged rancher's slain body.

Ezra groped out with a big hand on each side of the door for support while his breath wheezed in and out between set teeth. His one eye stared at the lifeless body as though it could not quite comprehend what it saw.

Sam was kneeling beside Wackett, his face gone a pasty white beneath the blue-black stubble of beard that the closest shave could not wholly remove from his face. He made a brief examination of the body, then glanced up and reported in a hushed tone, "Shot through the back. I don't like this, Ezra."

The big man waggled his head from side to side sorrowfully. "I don't reckon *he* likes it much neither."

"I don't mean that." Sam Sloan spoke swiftly. "He ain't been dead long. We better ride in a hurry. Folks'll think we did it."

"But we cain't tuck our tails an' run," Ezra protested. "Leave him layin' there. 'Tain't decent. Even if he was a old heller . . ."

He clamped his lips on the final word, jerked his head around to stare back into the night.

Sam had heard the sound also. He bounded to his feet as the thud of galloping hoofs came to them more distinctly through the pall-like silence.

"Too late now," he muttered. "Two riders . . . comin' up the road . . ."

TWO

EARLIER that same evening Joan Wackett quietly entered the long comfortable living room of the ranch house after washing the supper dishes. She was a tall supple girl with a wealth of reddish hair that showed yellow tints in the light of suspended coal-oil lamps. She wore a gray tweed skirt and a knit jacket that left her rounded forearms bare to the elbows.

Her father sat in a deep chair in front of the fireplace. There was a brooding look in his deep-set eyes. Leaping flames were reflected in the neat growth of white silken whiskers that hadn't been shaved for thirty years. He was very thin, and there was a look of aged frailty about him that shocked Joan when she noticed it. She had never thought about her father getting old. He had always been thin, but it had been the hard thinness of seasoned rawhide, the tough-fibered strength of a tree at timberline.

The girl suddenly realized that a great change had come over her father during the past few weeks. Not only signs of physical disintegration, but also a withdrawing of himself from the world about him. He was no longer in the saddle early in the morning to super-

vise the activities of his beloved ranch. More and more he had taken to turning over such matters to the foreman while he appeared content to sit in a deep chair with his own meditations.

Joan Wackett crossed the living room with the swinging free-limbed stride of a yearling colt. She perched herself on the arm of her father's chair and chucked him under the chin lightly. "You're not very good company these evenings, Dad."

Silas did not look at her. His thin lips twisted into a grimace. He spoke slowly, as though he selected each word with extreme care:

"I realize that, Joan. I think it's best. Best that you start learning to do without me."

"Don't say things like that, Dad." Joan's cool fingertips caressed his whiskered chin. "You're just down in the dumps," she chided lightly. "I'll bet you're still upset over that silly horse trade."

He turned on her with the ferocity of a striking snake. The faded blue of his eyes showed angry tints of orange. "It's a straw in the wind. Shows I'm losing my grip." He lifted one gnarled hand clenched tightly into a fist and his voice trembled with suppressed anger. "That's what everyone is whispering behind my back. I've become a laughing-stock . . . an object of pity. A poor old duffer in need of a guardian."

"Pooph." Joan rumpled his thin hair. "You've still got many a good horse trade left in you. You'll have them all laughing out of the other side of their mouths first thing anyone knows."

"Do you think so, Joan?" His thin fingers gripped her forearm tightly while his aged eyes sought confirmation of her faith. There was something pathetic in the old man's feverish eagerness to believe in himself again.

"Of course," she soothed him. "You'll make back all you lost on that Powder Valley deal, and more too. I've

watched you sitting around cooking up something. I know the signs. Don't tell me you haven't got something up your sleeve."

His laughter evidenced secret gratification. He rubbed his thin hands together close to the heat of the fire. "As a matter of fact, daughter, you've hit the nail right on the head." His voice rose defiantly. Renewed faith in himself was a heady intoxicant for the old man. "Finished, am I? Ha! I don't think so. I'm working on something big, Joan." He glanced up at the clock on the mantel and his manner became almost sly. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing. I thought we could just sit here together and talk . . . like old times."

"Nonsense, my dear. Isn't Tad Grayson coming over?"

"He said he would ride by, but I told him not to bother tonight. I'm afraid I've been neglecting you."

"I presume you think I need a nursemaid," the old man fumed. "I won't have it. You're young and you'll be young only once. Take your ride with Tad."

"But I don't want to leave you here alone, Dad. Truly. I'm a little tired tonight, and Tad . . . well, he isn't very exciting company."

"I won't be alone. In fact I'm expecting some important company soon. A matter of business. Run along with you now, and change into your riding things. I'll have one of the boys saddle Stella for you so you won't keep Tad waiting."

Joan hesitated, biting her under lip uncertainly. There was no mistaking the urgency in her father's voice. He wanted her out of the way for some reason.

She nodded unhappily and left the room, went slowly back to the back bedroom paneled in knotty pine and changed into whipcord riding breeches and boots, put on a leather jacket and knotted a yellow silk

scarf around her head to protect her hair from the night wind.

Tad Grayson was in the living room with her father when she returned. Tad was a stocky youngster with eyes the clear blue of a Colorado sky. His thick lips were always pouted slightly, giving him a sulky appearance that wasn't in keeping with his sunny disposition, and a cowlick of blond hair fell aslant his forehead where he was continually clawing at it with stubby fingers.

Tad Grayson owned a small spread adjoining the Crooked Cross on the north, and he had been hopelessly in love with Joan ever since she was six and he ten years old. Perhaps that was one reason why Joan found his company on night rides unexciting. She was so very sure of Tad. She always knew what he was going to say before he said it. She knew unerringly how he would react in any given situation, and she had accepted the fact of his adoration so many years that it had now become merely a casual relationship between them.

Tad was standing by her father's chair when Joan entered, and she felt a hint of constraint in the attitude of both. Tad turned quickly to face her, sucking in his lips, then forcing them to form a smile. He clawed at the cowlick on his forehead and said, "Hello, Joan."

Silas Wackett did not look at his daughter. His sharp elbows were planted on scrawny thighs and his chin cupped in interlaced fingers. He was staring into the fire and seemed totally unaware of her presence.

Joan felt a tight constriction about her heart. Inexplicable fear welled up in her suddenly. She fought back a feeling of panic, an inner apprehension of forces she did not understand.

It seemed to her that something had suddenly gone awry in her secure little world where she had been shel-

tered for twenty years. She couldn't analyze the feeling, but it was there, remained with her while she smiled mechanically at Tad and said, "Hello," then crossed swiftly to her father's side and placed her hand on his shoulder.

He maintained the same position without looking up. She squeezed his shoulder gently, and with a queer fierceness in her tone adjured him:

"Don't wear yourself out with business, Dad. I'll be home early."

"Don't make it too early." He continued to stare into the fire.

Joan patted his shoulder, then withdrew her hand with a feeling that he wasn't actually conscious of her presence. She turned to Tad and said with false lightness, "Shall we get started on that ride?"

He mumbled, "Might as well. It's a right pretty moon tonight."

They went to the door together. Joan paused on the threshold and looked back at her father. He remained seated with his back toward her, staring into the fire. With a sigh and a defeated shrug of her young shoulders she went out into the moonlit night with Tad Grayson.

Her gray filly was waiting saddled near the front door and Tad's pony was ground-tied beside Stella.

As they swung into their saddles together, Tad asked gruffly, "What kind of business is your dad doing tonight?"

"I don't know. He's expecting someone . . . wanted to get me out of the way, I think." Joan paused. Her voice hardened. "It's that Powder Valley business that has him so upset. He hasn't been the same since it happened. I could . . . Tad! I could kill those men that sold dad the sick horses."

They were following the road that led down toward

the creek crossing. When they reached a winding trail leading up into the hills on the left Tad reined his horse aside. In a curiously muffled voice he suggested, "Let's ride up this way."

He let Joan take the lead on the trail that was too narrow for two to ride abreast. The slope was dotted with dark clumps of juniper and spruce. The trail climbed steeply, lifting them abruptly from the floor of the valley into the higher country. Huge boulders jutted out of the hillside, their outlines softened and blurred in the gentle glow of moonlight.

Joan's Stella was breathing hard when they reached the top of the first ascent. She pulled her panting mount up, and Tad reined in beside her. He said, "Let's sit here for a while," and Joan nodded and swung off.

There was a flat-topped granite boulder beside the trail. They sat on it and Tad's shoulder pressed against Joan's. She cupped her chin in her hands and stared out over the breath-taking immensity of wooded slopes stretching out beneath, devoured in the far distance by the night haze.

Tad spoke sharply, as though he argued something with himself: "Those horses must have been sick when he bought them. They couldn't have caught anything up there in my pasture."

"Of course they couldn't, Tad. Dad knows that. No one blames you."

"I'm afraid . . . I blame myself," he confessed ruefully. He cracked one of his big knuckles and then was silent for a long time.

Joan was able to forget he sat beside her. She breathed in the clean cold air in deep satisfying draughts and it cleansed her mind of nervous doubts. She decided, happily, that everything was going to be all right again. Nothing had been right since the herd of horses driven up from Powder Valley had died. But

that had been a month ago. Her father would show them all yet.

Tad broke the long silence. His voice was rough and the words tumbled out as though he had held them dammed up a long time:

"I'm leaving, Joan. I'm going down to Mexico."

"Why, Tad!" She turned eyes that were wide with amazement upon him. "I didn't know."

His face was very close to hers; his eyes hot and mouth more sulky than usual. "I can't stand it here," he stated flatly. "I'm selling the ranch and I'm going to clear out. You won't care."

"Of course I will, Tad. Don't be foolish. Mexico?"

"Yes. Mexico," he responded doggedly. "I'm dickering with a man right now." He paused, then added in an injured tone, "I offered my place to your father but he just laughed at me. You won't . . . care," he repeated.

"I'll miss you a lot," she told him in all sincerity.

He had her by the shoulders suddenly. His big hands were strong and he drew her body close to his. His face wasn't that of the Tad she had known all her life. It frightened her. She tried to pull away but he bent forward until his lips were pressed hard against hers.

While she writhed against him futilely and he held her like that, the echoing blast of a pistol shot drifted up the long slope to them. Joan was scarcely conscious of the sound through the drumming in her ears.

Tad let go of her suddenly and she fell back, panting. "I'm not sorry," he told her in a curiously choked voice. "I've had that kiss coming for a long time. You can't put a man off forever."

She was dismayed to discover she wasn't angry with him. It hadn't been pleasant while it lasted, but in retrospect she was faintly proud that a man had held her and kissed her like that . . . because he couldn't control himself. If Tad would show that side of him-

self more often, she realized that she would respect him more as a lover.

But she was ashamed to let him know how she felt. She tossed her head and jumped to her feet. "I think we'd better go back now. I guess I can't trust you to act like a gentleman when a girl goes riding with you alone in the moonlight."

He said bitterly: "All right. Get huffy. But I'll bet you liked it. And when I'm gone to Mexico . . . I bet you remember that when you've forgotten a lot of other things about me."

She jumped on Stella and whirled the mare about, sent her plunging recklessly down the slope. Tad followed close behind.

When they turned into the road by the creek Joan saw the lights blazing from the windows and open doors of the ranch house. She turned to Tad as though nothing had happened and said, "Dad's company must still be with him. You'd better just ride on home when we get there."

He nodded glumly and rode on beside her. As they broke into the clearing that gave clear sight of the house they saw two men run out of the open door and leap on saddled horses outside. The horsemen disappeared swiftly into the timber on the other side of the clearing.

Joan pointed and exclaimed, "That's funny. The way those two men rode away so fast . . . without even closing the door."

"I don't see anything funny about it," Tad retorted. "Your father probably flew into one of his tantrums and they got mad and left."

"I don't care. I'm going to ride up there and see if anything's the matter before I unsaddle."

"Wait, Joan." Tad caught her rein and pulled Stella down. "Give a fellow a chance to say something."

"Let go." She tugged at the rein, unaccountable panic surging up inside of her. "You've said quite enough."

"No, I haven't. I haven't said half enough." He was scowling angrily. "It's time someone told you that your father . . ."

He got no further. Joan compressed her lips and viciously slammed spurs into the gray filly's flanks. Stella lunged forward and jerked the rein from Tad's grasp. He followed, swearing angrily.

Joan galloped up the slope and slid off in front of the open door.

Tad heard her scream as he jerked his mount up behind hers. When he flung himself off and ran forward clumsily she was kneeling in the doorway and hot tears were bathing her father's face.

THREE

"He's DEAD," Joan sobbed. "He's . . . he's *dead*, Tad!"

Tad Grayson stood on the stoop and peered down at her with a ludicrous expression of disbelief on his broad face. He was bent forward at the waist, braced with both hands on the door frame. He wonderingly wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, then pouted them away from his chattering teeth. He shook his head from side to side and kept repeating, "No, no, no," in a tone of shocked protest.

Joan leaped to her feet suddenly and whirled on him, gripping his shoulders tightly. Her face was pinched and white, and her eyes stared past him out into the night.

"That shot," she breathed. "I heard it, Tad. One shot. Oh, Tad! I heard it."

Her slender body began to quiver uncontrollably. He

put his arms about her awkwardly but she pushed him back with surprising strength. Her eyes blazed at him.

"Don't touch me," she warned sharply. "Don't ever touch me again, Tad. I'll always remember that you were . . . kissing me when I heard the shot. You were kissing me when someone killed Dad," she repeated in a whisper.

Tad licked his lips again. He mumbled, "Don't take on so . . . like it was your fault. Or mine. We didn't know, Joan. We couldn't help it."

She backed away from him, shaking her head. "If I hadn't gone riding with you it wouldn't have happened. It must have been those men. The ones Dad was expecting."

"Men?" he asked sharply.

"The ones that jumped on their horses and rode off when we were coming up," Joan reminded him. "And we ought to be starting after them. Go down to the bunkhouse and rouse up the crew . . ."

Tad shook his head. There was a look of hurt bewilderment on his youthful face. He muttered, "We got to sort of check up on things. Can't go off half-cocked. I reckon maybe nobody was to blame. You know how he was, Joan. He must of got killing mad . . . pulled a gun . . ." His voice trailed off into silence. It was as though he argued something with himself against his own conscious will.

"Dad wasn't packing a gun," Joan shrilled at him. "Look." She pointed to her father's limp body with a trembling forefinger. "He wasn't armed. He . . . *he was shot through the back*, Tad."

"By God," Tad Grayson swore, "you're right, Joan." He dropped on his knees and made a hasty examination, and a black look of anger spread over his face. His pouting lips drew in to a straight thin line that made him look older, and tired.

He got to his feet slowly and his hard gaze quested around the living room.

Joan correctly interpreted the seeking look in his eyes. She spun around, saying swiftly, "I'll get it for you."

He waited there while she ran into an inner room. She came back hurriedly with a worn, cartridge-studded gun-belt hanging from her extended hands. Her father's old Navy Colt with the dust of months on the smooth wooden butt was encased in a serviceable holster of soft, rubbed leather.

Tad took the gun-belt from her hands without speaking. He swung it about his waist and buckled it into place, settled the heavy holster snugly against his right thigh. There was a look of hard defiance on his face and his eyes were like rounded pieces of flint.

He trotted to the door and hallooed loudly down the slope toward the bunkhouse. When there was no immediate response he swore loudly and drew the gun from his hip. Two heavy blasts reverberated through the night silence. He shouted again as the echo crashed back from the hillside.

A light showed in the bunkhouse and he turned back to Joan, who watched him from the doorway. "They'll be here in a minute," he told her hoarsely. "I'll . . . ride for the sheriff."

She cried, "Wait, Tad," as he turned to his horse. She ran to him, gripped his arm. "Why don't you and the hands get started after those two men? You don't need any sheriff," she went on fiercely.

He shook her hand off his arm and avoided meeting her eyes. "We don't know it was them. Don't want to make a mistake."

"In the meantime they'll be getting away. What's the use of wasting time?"

He said, "I'm sorry, Joan," and there was a strange

urgency in his voice. "I'll have to play this my own way."

"I'll have Buck go after them," she cried with a sob in her voice. "He won't wait for any sheriff," but Tad was in the saddle spurring away.

She turned to meet the Crooked Cross foreman, Buck Harris, who came trotting up the hillside tucking in his shirttail with a half a dozen riders straggling along behind him. She explained the situation in terse words while Buck and the men listened, leading the way across the clearing to the point where she had seen Ezra and Sam disappear from view.

"You bet we won't wait fer no sheriff, Miss Joan," Buck assured her when she repeated in a stinging tone what Tad had said. He issued sharp orders to get horses saddled and guns buckled on, then strode to the ranch house with the girl to view the body of the owner slain by a cowardly bullet.

While Joan was getting the Crooked Cross foreman and riders started after Sam and Ezra, Tad Grayson was riding hell-bent away from the ranch. Hunched low in the saddle with his youthful face set in new grim lines, he communicated his own inner urgency to his mount, and the horse stretched out in a thundering gallop that swiftly carried him to the creek crossing.

The shallow water churned and was cascaded high in front of them as the horse surged into the ford without slackened speed.

Tad drew himself erect sharply and tugged on the reins as they mounted the farther bank. He slued his mount about and down to a trot, dropping his hand to the comforting butt of Silas Wackett's six-gun as the three cottonwoods took form in the moonlight before him.

The three aged trees were set close enough together so that their heavily leafed branches intertwined twenty

feet above the ground, casting a wide circle of black shadow beneath.

Tad Grayson drew his mount up short in front of the cottonwoods. He leaned forward in the saddle, peering with slitted eyes into the blackness of the shadow.

There was almost imperceptible movement on the far side of the circle. A blending of shadow within shadows, a merging of deeper blackness against the black backdrop formed by the triangle of cottonwoods.

Tad's sweaty hand gripped the butt of the .44 with fierce tensity. A nervous ague shivered through his body. He called out in a low thick voice, "That you, L. B.?"

"Shore, it's me," a mocking voice came back. "Ride on in clost, yuh dang fool, where cain't nobody see us."

"Yeh," Tad responded thickly. "Guess I better." He let his horse forward slowly, retaining his tensed attitude and keeping his fingers clamped about the butt of Wackett's Colt.

Once out of the bright moonlight inside the circle of deep shadow, his eyes were able to focus on the figure of the mounted man who waited for him.

The rider was dressed in black and mounted on a coal-black horse, with the wide brim of a black sombrero pulled low over his face to hide his features.

A sneering laugh came from his lips as Tad rode close. He growled, "Fust time I ever seen you pack a hawg-leg. Scairt of the dark, I reckon." He sat at ease in the saddle with both arms folded across his chest. Twin gun-belts were criss-crossed about his waist, sagging under the weight of heavy guns in holsters that were tied low on his thighs.

"Damn your black soul to hell," Tad Grayson raged. "I've just come from the Crooked Cross ranch."

"What of it?"

"You know what of it," snarled Tad. "I've come

a-gunning, that's what. I aim to blow out your guts just like you blew out Wackett's."

"Sho' now." Laughter gurgled between the other's words. "That's right braggy talk. I reckon yo're jest upsot, an' I'll give you a chanct tuh cool off . . ."

"Why did you do it?" Tad interrupted fiercely. "You promised me there wouldn't be any trouble."

"There wasn't no trouble." The man in black still sounded vastly amused.

"You didn't tell me you were going to bring anyone else. If I'd known there were going to be two of you . . ."

"Anyone else? What you talkin' aboot?"

"We saw you jump on your horses and ride away," Tad told him bitterly. "Joan and me. Just as we rode up."

"Yore eyes musta been playin' tricks on yuh. There wasn't but only me . . . like I said there'd be."

"There's no use lying," Tad flared out. "I told you I'd come a-gunning. Draw, damn you!"

He tugged at the holstered .44, jerked the barrel free and swung it up in a short arc.

There was answering motion from the mounted man in front of him. Motion so swift that it was only a blur in the illusive shadow.

A gun thundered and orange flame lanced evilly at Tad. He felt a numbing shock in his right hand, looked down stupidly as the Navy Colt fell to the ground beside his horse. He flexed the fingers of his right hand in bewilderment, found to his amazement that they were all there—that he was untouched by the bullet that had smashed his gun to the ground.

He drew in a great sobbing breath of rage as the other laughed aloud. He spurred his horse forward to collide with the other, driven by an insane anger that refused to consider the odds against him.

He swung his heavy fist in a short arc toward the other's chin, encountered only thin air, and the force of his blow toppled him forward helplessly where he received a slashing blow across the head with the heavy barrel of the other's six-gun.

Everything went black for an instant, and he slid from the saddle in a limp heap.

He sat up after a moment, shaking his head stupidly, and became aware that the black-garbed rider still sat his horse indolently and laughed down at him.

"Mebby that'll larn you," the other drawled. "Sorta too big fer yore pants, ain't you, young feller?"

Tad moaned through set teeth and tried to stand up. His head swam dizzily and he sank back to the earth.

"Take it easy," he was coolly advised. "I reckon I knocked some sense into yore haid."

"I'll get you, by God," Tad swore. "I'll get you if it's the last thing I do on earth."

"*Tryin'* is more like to be the las' thing you'll do on earth. You set right there an' lissen to me. I went to see Silas Wackett alone tonight . . . jest like you an' me planned. If you an' the gal saw two fellers ride away, it musta bin two other fellers. Me, I bin gone from there for half a hour or more."

"You mean you . . . didn't . . . didn't kill Silas Wackett?" Tad mumbled.

"Ain't I tellin' you I bin gone more'n half a hour? If two other gents visited him after me, an' if Silas is daid like you say . . . who d'yuh reckon done it?"

"I . . . I reckon I dunno," Tad confessed. He was still dazed and unable to think clearly. He put a wondering hand up to his head and gingerly felt of a swelling the size of a quail's egg where the gun-barrel had struck.

"Stands to reason," his companion stated strongly. "I don't shoot nobody in the back nohow. Any time I

send a man to Kingdom Come he gets blasted plumb dead center in front . . . jest like I'd of blasted you a while back if I hadn't took pity on you an' figgered you was too young to die."

"Yeh," Tad acknowledged weakly. "I reckon maybe you're right. You could have drilled me just as good as not."

"Course, I ain't sayin' it ain't good luck fer us the ol' man is daid," the other went on jovially. "Stubborn ol' coot that wouldn't lissen to reason nohow. I reckon you kin han'le the gal easier'n I could him."

"Joan? She'll own the Crooked Cross now? I hadn't thought of that." Tad sat cross-legged on the ground with his brooding gaze bent downward. "Yeh," he confessed dubiously. "That does fix things up, sorta. I've been afraid the old man was getting suspicious here lately."

"Thing fer you to do is get in good with her right fast, an' stay in good with her. Best way to do that is he'p catch them two riders an' string 'em up. You've wasted a lot of time here."

"I told her I was riding for the sheriff," Tad confessed. "She wanted me to take right out after the riders we saw, but I . . ." His voice faltered off inconclusively.

"But you was so consarned certain it was me did the killin' you strapped on her daddy's ol' gun an' hurried here where I said I'd meet you," the other finished for him sarcastically. "Now . . . when you don't turn up with the killer or the sheriff, she's gonna think you ain't bin much he'p."

"That's right." Tad staggered to his feet. He hesitated, then walked back and retrieved the gun that had been shot out of his hand.

"You ride fer the sheriff an' git a posse together fast as you kin. It ain't too late yet. Meet me tomorrer night at the reg'lar place an' we'll see what's what."

"All right." Tad laboriously climbed aboard his horse which had been standing by patiently ever since his rider had been dislodged from the saddle. He mumbled, "Tomorrow night," and swung his mount out of the concealing shadow, drove him at a gallop toward town to arouse the sheriff and gather a posse.

FOUR

THE GAMUT of varied emotions Tad Grayson had run during the past half hour had left him shaken and weak. He sat loosely in the saddle and let his horse carry him away from the group of cottonwoods while his mind struggled to make some sort of order out of the mass of conflicting facts that confronted him.

He had ridden to keep his tryst with the black-garbed rider all tensed up to face Silas Wackett's murderer. He felt deflated now, wholly at a loss. He realized he hadn't done himself any good in Joan's eyes by insisting on riding away from the ranch for the sheriff instead of leading the pursuit of the two strangers who he was now convinced had committed the crime.

But he had been so sure he was right. Now he couldn't tell Joan, couldn't explain to her that he had felt sure he knew where the actual murderer would be awaiting him.

Everything was in one hell of a mess, he told himself bitterly. A lot of it was his fault. He had let himself be drawn into a situation that had ended in murder.

His conscious thoughts recoiled from the impact of the word. Instinctively, he knew he couldn't trust the two-gunned stranger on the black horse. He wasn't at all sure he was telling the truth, even now. He hadn't trusted the man from the beginning of the scheme, but

had weakly let himself become an accomplice—and now he was in it up to his neck.

He had somehow to get back Joan's confidence. That was of paramount importance, now that her father was dead.

He saw a dim light glowing ahead of him and pulled his horse up as he realized he was approaching Old Man Cargat's saloon where the roads branched.

The old fellow was still up. Tad needed a drink. He needed to talk to someone. He needed several drinks to wash the taste of tonight's affair out of his mouth. A few more minutes lost in getting to the sheriff wouldn't matter one way or another. It was a cinch Joan would have the Crooked Cross hands out after the murderers.

He slid off his horse and trotted up to the closed front door of the saloon. The lighted window was in the rear where Cargat kept bachelor quarters.

Tad rattled the knob and found the door locked. He knocked loudly and got no response, then pulled his .44 and pounded on the wooden door with the butt.

That brought the saloon-keeper to the door. He had his shirt and boots off, ready for bed. His yellowish old face was screwed up angrily when he glared out at his late visitor.

He grumbled, "What in tunket . . . ?" Then, in a surprised tone, "It's you. Tad Grayson. Don't yuh know it's pas' midnight . . ."

Tad pushed past him toward the bar. He muttered thickly, "Pour me a drink, Dad. A big one."

Dad Cargat hesitated, then shuffled forward in his bare feet. "When a young feller turns tuh likker at midnight," he observed sententiously, "I kin allus guess the reason." He slopped a water glass half full of red whisky and shoved it in front of the young man. "Hol' yore nose an' pour her down."

Tad closed both hands around the glass and tipped it to his lips. He drank half the contents without drawing a breath, then shuddered and set it down hastily. "What the hell did you put in that glass?"

The old man's lips parted in a toothless smile. "That's my Hell-fire Special, son. I keep it fer young fellers like you when yore best gal has done jilted yuh."

Tad stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Was that any reason to give it to me?"

"Didn't I say I knowed what was eatin' on yore guts when you routed me out at midnight fer a drink . . . an' you not a drinkin' man? Go on with yuh, Tad. I know dang well you bin sparking Joan Wackett. I reckon she give you yore walkin' papers tonight. Go ahaid. Drink up the rest of it. It'll give you a burnin' in yore belly that'll ease the pain in yore poor busted heart." The old man cackled and nodded toward Tad's half-filled glass.

Tad shook his head. His lips formed a pout, giving his face a sulky expression. "You guessed wrong this time. I was ridin' with Joan tonight, all right, but that's not why I needed a drink to steady my nerves."

"Did them two yahoos from Powder Valley find the Crooked Cross ranch awright?"

Tad turned slowly to look at the old bartender. "What . . . two yahoos?"

"Them fellers that stopped by to ask *directions*? A big one-eyed ugly-lookin' son-uv-a-gun an' a short black-lookin' feller."

"From . . . Powder Valley?" faltered Tad.

"Yep. They're the fellers that out-slickered Silas in that hawse trade las' month, so they bragged to me."

Tad leaned his full weight on both hands placed flat down on the bar. He licked his lips and his eyes glittered in the dim light. "When were they by here, Dad?"

"Hour er so ago. They were plenty on the prod, too. 'Specially the big un. He got plumb wringy when I menshuned sellin' them sick hawses that up an' died soon's Silas got 'em back here. Mighta kilt me if his pardner hadn't of pulled him off my neck." The old man's fingers went up tenderly to his throat where the marks left by Ezra's big hands were still evident in the mottled, loose flesh.

"And they were headed for the Crooked Cross?" Tad persisted.

"'Deed they was. An' that's where they went, I reckon, spite of me tryin' to warn 'em to stay away from Silas Wackett. I tol' how consarned mad he'd got about the hawse trade . . ."

Tad Grayson silenced the old man's garrulous words by pounding a doubled fist on the bar. "It was *them* Joan and me saw. It was them, by God. It must of been."

"Where'd you see 'em? One was great big . . ."

"We couldn't see them to tell what they looked like. They rode away hell-for-leather from the ranch when we came home . . . leaving Silas Wackett dead on the floor behind them."

"Silas? Daid?" the old man quavered. He leaned over the bar and clutched Tad's bulky shoulder with claw-like fingers. "What's that yo're sayin, boy?"

"Didn't I . . . haven't I told you?" stammered Tad. "That's funny. I reckon I just had a feeling everybody knew it. Sure. Mr. Wackett's dead. Murdered in his own house while Joan and I were out riding."

Dad Cargat let go of Tad's shoulder. He scooped up the drink Tad had set down, and drank it himself. His eyes rolled glassily for a moment and he shook his head mournfully.

"I warned them fellers trouble was brewin' when

they said they aimed to see Silas. I said to 'em, I says, 'Silas is a rootin'-tootin' ol' he-rattler in these yere parts, an' he's shore got his mad up about them hawses.' I says to 'em . . ."

"What'd *they* say? Were they wearin' guns?"

"O' course they was wearin' guns. Ain't I tol' you I knowed they was bad hombres the minute I set eyes on 'em? Hell, they tried to murder me right here in m'own saloon jest because I tried to do 'em a good turn. That big un . . . he's sorta crazy, I reckon. That one eye of his'n shot out flames of pure fire when he got mad. . . ."

"What'd they say? Did they threaten Mr. Wackett?"

"O' course they threatened him," Dad Cargat responded indignantly. "Ain't I bin tellin' yuh? When I warned 'em about Silas havin' his mad up, they laughed an' laughed. Said it served the ol' fool right fer buyin' a herd without lookin' 'em over careful. Said the madder he got the better they liked it. Said they liked to see ol' men squirm like a worm in hot ashes, an' that's what they was headed to the Crooked Cross fer . . . to watch him squirm some more." The old man's imagination was working beautifully. Given time he would have worked up a really good story about his short interview with Ezra and Sam, but Tad Grayson had heard enough.

He was convinced now that the man in the cottonwoods had told the truth. He was no longer hesitant about bringing in the sheriff and a posse to track down the horse-traders from Powder Valley. Thank God, *he* was in the clear. It wouldn't be necessary, now, for him to reveal the embarrassing truth about his connection with the man who had visited Silas Wackett prior to Sam and Ezra's visit.

He squared his shoulders and swung away from the bar as though a great load had been lifted from his back. "I'm riding to town for the sheriff. If we don't

catch those killers right quick, I reckon he'll be wanting a description of them from you, Dad."

"I'll give it to him, awright." Dad followed Tad to the door. "I'll never fergit them two ugly faces. Soon's I saw 'em, I says to myse'f, I says . . ."

But Tad was mounted and thundering away toward town and Dad Cargat's voice drooled off to a murmur with no one to listen to him.

FIVE

"Now, B'GOD, we shore are in the middle of one hell of a mess," Sam Sloan swore disgustedly to Ezra when they stopped their horses on the edge of the clearing and looked back at the Crooked Cross ranch house.

"A gal an' a young feller," Ezra reported interestedly, watching Joan and Tad ride up. "The gal's gettin' off an' goin' in . . . right nice-set-up youngun. If I was twenty years closter to short pants . . ."

Joan's scream as she caught sight of her father's body cut Ezra short.

Sam snorted disgustedly. "You better be thinkin' about suthin' else besides young gals, you ol' one-eyed walrus. Them two musta seen us ridin' away. Don't you know they'll think we done it?"

"What? Shot that ol' gazook through the back?" Ezra's tone was full of pained indignation. "Any shootin' we do will be from in front. Anybody that knows us . . ."

"But that's the plumb hell of it," Sam jerked out anxiously. "Nobody knows us hereabouts. We're way off our home range."

"They kin send back to Powder Valley for a report. Pat Stevens ain't gonna let 'em make no mistake about us."

"Posses don't waste time sending for reports," Sam snapped. "If they catch us hereabouts the fust thing Pat'll know about it will be after our necks have both done stretched a foot."

They remained quietly in the concealed shadow of the thick timber and watched with interest while Tad ran back out of the house and shouted for the hands, then fired Wackett's gun to arouse them.

Sam nodded as though he had won an argument when Tad leaped on his horse and rode off hell-bent for town. He muttered, "There goes the young feller headin' for the sheriff, I bet you. They'll be roundin' up a posse while the Crooked Cross riders get on our trail here. . . ."

"What we waitin' for then?" Ezra grunted sourly. "Le's get outta here while the gettin's good."

He spurred his horse ahead into the timber, and Sam Sloan followed him after one last look backward to the clearing where Joan was talking to her father's foreman and gesticulating excitedly.

Though both Sam and Ezra detested the thought of skulking away from the scene of the murder as though they were criminals, they both realized that this was one time when discretion was distinctly the better part of valor. They were a long way from Powder Valley where they were well-known and respected citizens, and they knew the temper of Westerners well enough to know a posse was likely to string them up first and ask questions afterward if they were caught in the vicinity.

In the lead, Ezra presently found a path through the timber leading up the slope back of the ranch and circling gradually back in the direction from which they had come, and after a few miles it debouched into a rutted road wide enough to allow Sam to spur his horse up alongside Ezra's.

"No sound of 'em comin' yet," Sam jerked out gladly. "I reckon this road'll hit the trail to Powder Valley down below the town a piece, an' I vote solid for keepin' right on ridin' for home."

Ezra nodded glumly. "Home'll be safest," he agreed. Then, "Doggone it, Sam. With ol' man Wackett daid we never will get to tell him the truth about that hawse trade."

"I reckon the old feller died thinkin' we was a couple of skunks," Sam agreed cheerily. "Too dang bad . . . after we done rode more'n a hundred miles to fix things up with him."

"Whoever shot him afore we got there done us a bad turn. Whoever 'twas, he mighta waited till we'd done our explainin'."

"Feller that triggered him done ol' man Wackett a wuss turn," Sam commented. "I'd ruther keep on livin' with a bad repytishun than be daid with a good one."

"Makes me plumb mad, though," Ezra argued. "Seems like mebby we oughtta stick around here an' put our brand on the feller that kep' us from seein' Wackett an' settin' things right with him."

Sam Sloan smiled thinly at the hulking one-eyed man who rode beside him. "We're through with all that kid stuff. 'Tain't our place to catch Wackett's killer. They's a dooly 'lected sheriff for that job."

"All the same, we've got a stake in he'pin' catch him," Ezra reminded his partner hopefully. "We could circle back into town an' pertend we was just comin' up from Powder Valley to see Wackett. Then no one'd know we'd bin at the ranch a-tall. We could nose aroun' an' find out who done it, an' . . ."

"Nothing doin'," Sam cut him off shortly. "If Pat Stevens was along I'd say awright. But you an' me ain't wuth a damn without Pat."

"The hell we ain't. Why, Pat Stevens never was no good to us. You know dang well he was jest a sort of extra wheel, an' allus causin' us trouble. . . ."

Sam snorted loudly and pointedly. "You talk a lot with yore mouth an' don't say nothin'. If you was in trouble you'd run to Pat like a baby toddlin' to mama. Why, I recollect the time down in Tucson . . ."

"That's a dang lie. That time in Tucson I'd a bin awright if Pat hadn't got in my way . . ."

"Shore, you'd been awright," Sam mocked him. "You'd be shovelin' coal in hell right now an' you know it. No, siree, we ain't meddlin' with murder hereabouts. We're gonna keep right on ridin' back to Powder Valley an' we ain't gonna tell *nobody* we was at the Crooked Cross ranch tonight."

Ezra rode on beside his smaller partner in glum silence, trying to think of an argument that would sway Sam, but, as usual, finding himself completely inarticulate and unable to think of arguments as fast as Sam could answer them.

If Pat was with them, Ezra thought to himself, they wouldn't be running away from trouble like this. Pat Stevens had always had a penchant for trouble. But Pat was a family man now, tied pretty close to Sally's apron strings. The last time the three had been able to get together on a man-hunt, Sally had even joined them—and had succeeded in making everything much more difficult by letting herself be captured by the gang they were tracking down in Dusty Canyon.

The narrow, lonely road continued to stretch out in front of the two men through the moonlight. There were no ranches up on these higher slopes, no range fences because there was little grass and the ranchers in the valley didn't graze their stock so high.

Ezra and Sam both figured they were perfectly safe

from pursuit, now that they had gotten so far away from the ranch undetected. They were quite certain the girl and young man hadn't seen them close enough to recognize them again as they fled from the scene of death, so it looked as if they were wholly in the clear as far as Silas Wackett's murder was concerned.

The thing that irked both of them was that they had ridden a hundred miles for nothing, and that now they could never clear themselves of the charge that they had pulled a crooked deal by selling Wackett a herd of sick horses.

Ezra continued his sullen silence as they kept on putting more miles between themselves and the Crooked Cross ranch. Sometimes Sam made him so mad he didn't speak to him for days. Ezra had an idea this was going to be one of the times. He kept getting madder and madder as they rode along, and he began honing for Sam to speak just so he could insult him by refusing to answer.

But when Sam did speak, Ezra forgot all about being so angry he wasn't going to reply.

For Sam jerked his horse to a sudden stop and exclaimed, "By gorry, Ezra! We're forgettin' that ol' man in the saloon."

"What ol' man? Oh! The one that couldn't drink his own rot-gut? Dog my cats, that shore was funny." Ezra began laughing loudly, his ill humor completely forgotten.

"Yeh, that's the one I mean." Sam's voice was ominously calm. He continued slowly, "The one we ast the way to the Crooked Cross ranch."

Ezra continued to chuckle deep in his barrel-like chest. "He was a funny ol' coot, awright. Remember how he warned us Silas Wackett was on the prod about them hawses."

"That," said Sam, "is ezactly what I am rememberin'.

He figgered we were headin' into trouble at the Crooked Cross."

"But we told him we were gonna fix things up with Wackett . . ."

"Which we didn't," Sam reminded him, "because Wackett was awready daid."

Ezra nodded uneasily. His one eye gleamed queerly in the moonlight while he screwed his heavy features up in concentrated thought. In a troubled voice he suggested, "Not knowin' no diffrunt . . . that ol' man's liable to think we *did* have trouble with Wackett."

"It's time you were catchin' on," Sam commented acidly. "Yep. He's not only gonna *think* so . . . he's gonna tell folks so. He's gonna tell everybody that them two hawse-traders from Powder Valley was at Wackett's place tonight. It ain't gonna take smart arithmetic to add two an' two together an' add up that we killed Wackett."

"Yo're right." Ezra pounded his thigh. "Even gettin' back to Powder Valley ain't gonna do us no good. Damn it, Sam. They'll be sendin' the sheriff after us."

"Yes, sir. We're as good as strung up right now. We ain't got no alibi . . . no nothin'. Nobody'll believe us if we say Wackett was awready daid when we got there. They'll ask why we run away . . . if we didn't kill him. I tell you, Ezra, we ain't got no more chanct than a three-legged rabbit runnin' from a she-coyote."

"Less'n we snoop aroun' an' find the real killer," Ezra suggested eagerly. "That's what I said fust off."

Sam groaned loudly. "Get it through your thick haid that soon's we show our noses we'll stick our haids in a noose. Once that ol' man starts talkin' our goose is cooked to a frazzle."

"We could hide out, mebby. Up here in these hills . . ."

"How long could we stay hid out? We got to eat.

An' there's our ranch in Powder Valley . . . Damn it, Ezra! This ain't no time for foolin' ourselves. I tell you. I can awready feel a rope chokin' off my breathin'. We'd bin lots better off if we'd stayed right there at the ranch an' told the truth. Somebody *might* have believed us."

Ezra was beginning to sweat freely. "It's too late to think about that now. We're a long ways from the ranch."

"But not so very dang far from that saloon, I reckon," Sam said with sudden vigor. "If we could get holt of that ol' man before he blabbed off about us visitin' Silas Wackett . . ."

"Shore," Ezra agreed immediately, with great relief. "We'll wring his neck before he tells anybody . . ."

"We won't do nothin' like that," Sam contradicted him flatly. "It ain't his fault we stopped an ast the way from him. You cain't kill a man for that."

"Why not?" rumbled Ezra. "I didn't like his looks nohow."

"Here's what we will do," Sam outlined swiftly. "We'll ride straight from here to the saloon an' rout him out before he gets a chanct to tell anybody. You can take him up in the hills an' keep him hid there while I ride hell-bent for Pat Stevens. I'll bring Pat back with me an' him an' me'll find out who killed Wackett. *After* we get the right man it'll be awright to turn the saloon-keeper loose an' let him talk all he wants. Let's turn off right here an' get to that saloon as quick as we can. We ain't gonna be safe till we fix that ol' man so he cain't talk."

Twenty minutes later Sam and Ezra were pounding urgently on the door of Dad Cargat's darkened saloon. It took a lot of pounding to arouse the old man, who had gone to bed after Tad Grayson rode away to get the sheriff, but he finally unbolted the door and opened

it, peering out into the moonlight past a kerosene lamp in his hand.

A frightened ejaculation escaped his lips when he recognized the two men outside the door. He made a desperate effort to close it against them, but Ezra lunged forward and clasped him in a bear hug while Sam caught the lamp from the old man's fingers.

They entered and closed the door hastily, and Sam stuffed a dirty bandanna in Dad Cargat's mouth to keep any chance passer-by from hearing his yelps for help, then they carried him back to his living quarters in the rear and roughly put some clothes on him and tied his hands securely behind his back.

Then, in accord with a plan they had agreed on while riding to the saloon, they found an empty gunny sack and loaded it full of canned food and a few staples they found on the kitchen shelves, collected a few cooking utensils for Ezra's use while he kept the old man prisoner in the hills, and in less than ten minutes after reaching the saloon they were riding away from it again.

Ezra had the frail body of Dad Cargat in front of him in the saddle, while Sam balanced the sack of supplies on his saddlehorn.

They cut directly across the road and up into the uninhabited timberlands above the valley floor, pushing their overburdened mounts upward at a laborious gallop until they were miles from the road and possible pursuit.

Sam was in the lead and he slowed down, shouting back to Ezra, "Somewhere hereabouts, I reckon, is a good place for you to stay hid out with him while I ride for Pat. Jerk that rag out of his mouth so he can talk. Mebby he'll know a cabin or somethin' where you an' him can stay."

Ezra had been holding one big hand clamped over

Dad Cargat's mouth to keep the gag inside. He pulled the bandanna away and growled at the frightened old man:

"I reckon you heard what my pardner jest said. You an' me are gonna stay hid out for a time. If yo're smart, you'll . . ."

Old Man Cargat's eyes blazed and he shrilled at his big captor defiantly, "Whyn't you kill me right off like you did Silas Wackett? You coulda shot me in the back jest as easy . . ."

Sam spurred up beside Ezra, cursing loudly. "How'd you hear about Wackett?"

"Tad Grayson stopped by an' told me. He's got the sheriff huntin' for you fellers right now. I told him about you threatenin' Silas. You ain't got a chance to git away. You kin kill me an' bury my body, but they'll hang you shore, an' if you kill me fust I'll be squatting on a coal of fire an' laughin' in yore faces when you come down to jine me."

Neither Ezra nor Sam paid any attention to the last part of the old man's outburst. They were staring at each other in consternation, realizing that their desperate attempt to seal Cargat's lips by kidnaping him had failed—that already the hue and cry was out for them—that in the valley below armed men were even now searching for them, with orders to shoot to kill the moment either of them was sighted by a posse member.

SIX

THE LITTLE COW-TOWN of Dutch Springs, Colorado, in Powder Valley hadn't changed outwardly very much from the sleepy village it had been almost a decade before when Pat Stevens, with the aid of Ezra and Sam,

had ridden in with blazing guns and cleaned up one of the worst hell-holes of corruption that ever flourished in the West.

But there had been a lot of changes, even though they weren't evident outwardly. It was a normal, peaceful Western community now. There was a schoolhouse with a lady teacher from Boston, and a church where citizens gathered on Sundays to worship God under the leadership of an evangelistic circuit rider who had taken the little town under his wing.

The whole of Powder Valley, now, was a place where men could settle and rear their families, where few men packed hip-guns and where the only shooting was from the guns of young cowboys who had overindulged at the Gold Eagle Saloon on Saturday nights.

All in all, it was a good change that had come to the Colorado community, and Pat Stevens was justifiably proud of the part he had played in laying the foundation for the new order of things.

Driving in from the Lazy Mare ranch for supplies in mid-afternoon with Sally and his young son Dock on the seat of the buckboard beside him, Pat waved his hand ahead with pride as the outlines of dusty buildings appeared through the sun-haze.

"There it is, Sally. Sort of always gives me a good warm feelin' inside to be driving into Dutch Springs with nothing to worry about except whether you can match that piece of calico you've got in your sewing bag."

Sally Stevens nodded her pretty head in emphatic agreement. She knew that warm feeling Pat meant, for she had been by his side ten years before with a hot gun in her hand when the struggle between the forces of good and evil in the valley had been decided.

Ten years had given Sally's slim figure the becoming curves of maturity, and the girlish beauty of her fea-

tures had taken on the sweet bloom of motherhood.

"Life is awfully good to us, Pat. You don't know how wonderful it is for me to have you at home every night . . . to be rid of that terrible emptiness inside of me that I used to feel when you rode away from the ranch with loaded holsters and I didn't know whether I'd ever see you again."

"But I always came back," Pat grinned at her. "You know why, Sally?" he went on in a teasing tone. "Because I was always scairt of how purty you'd look in a widder's black . . . couldn't stand to think of some other feller marryin' you to get hold of the Lazy Mare."

"When can I have your big guns to wear on *my* hips, Daddy?" young Dock piped up from the other side of Sally. "You promised me I could when you were all through with them."

"He's all through with them now," Sally told her eager son comfortably. "He's going to give them to you as soon as you get big enough so they'll buckle on and not fall off."

Pat whistled cheerily at the trotting span of bay horses to increase their pace a bit. "Looks like there might be a little storm." He pointed to a black cloud gathering over the high peaks westward. "We'll try to finish up our shopping in a hurry and get back."

The buckboard was spinning rapidly into the wide dusty main street of Dutch Springs. A few vehicles lined the business block, a dozen or more saddled horses stood with drooped heads at hitchracks.

Pat pulled the bays up with a flourish in front of the general store. He cramped the front wheels sideways so Sally and Dock could step down easily, then jumped lithely to the ground and hitched the team to the rail. "You go on in and do your shopping, Sally. I reckon I'll mosey down to the Gold Eagle and say howdy to the boys."

"Not too many howdys, Pat Stevens," Sally warned him, puckering her pretty brows. "I don't want you staggering out to drive us home."

"Can't I go with Daddy?" Dock pleaded.

"To the Gold Eagle? I should say not. You come right in with me and I'll pick you out some new shirts."

Pat grinned at Sally and strolled down the deserted board walk toward the Gold Eagle Saloon where most of the saddled horses were hitched.

Not a breath of air stirred as Pat walked along the street. An oppressive sultriness had descended upon Dutch Springs with the gathering of storm clouds in the west. The sun was a fiery red ball and the afternoon heat mist was tinged with flame color.

Pat pulled out a bandanna handkerchief and mopped big beads of sweat from his forehead as he strode along.

It was pleasantly cool inside the low-raftered saloon. The long room was comfortably dim after the heat glare outside. A quartet of punchers were languidly playing stud poker at the far end of the saloon, and three men were lounging at the bar when Pat entered.

He noted a cessation of talk as the doors swung shut behind him. The rustle of cards at the rear table stopped, and he saw four heads turn in his direction.

Sheriff Ed Grimes was one of the men at the bar. The man beyond Sheriff Grimes was a stranger to Pat Stevens; a tall lean man with the dust of hard riding clinging to his clothes, cold-eyed and thin-lipped, with a .44 on his hip. Beyond the stranger was John Bailey, owner of a large spread adjoining Sam and Ezra's ranch south of town. Bailey was a fat man with a moonlike face and mild blue eyes. There was a hurt, frightened look on Bailey's face when he looked at Pat, and he ran out a small red tongue to wet his flaccid lips.

Pat gave Grimes a hearty, "Howdy, Sheriff," and bellied up to the bar beside him, drawling, "I'll buy one."

Sheriff Ed Grimes was a heavy-set man, with strong, dark features. A fair man, and utterly fearless, he owed a lot to Pat Stevens for his influence with the voters of the county that had won him the last election. He ran the county office honestly, and was respected and liked by his constituents.

He cleared his throat loudly when Pat spoke to him, then simulated a tone of surprise, "If it ain't Pat Stevens. I didn't know yore wife ever let you stray so far from home."

Pat chuckled, "Sally's in the store buyin' a few things. I got strict orders not to drink more'n I can carry with dignity."

The sheriff said, "Ha-ha," in a hollow tone. No one else said anything. Pat frowned at the thick silence in the saloon. He leaned forward to look down the bar at Bailey, asking, "What are you drinking, John? You and yore friend," indicating the lean stranger with a lifted eyebrow.

"Oh yeh," said Sheriff Grimes uncomfortably. "This feller is sorta lookin' for you, Pat. Just rode into town a hour ago. Name's Pete Bemis . . . from up Bleeker way . . . depitty sheriff," Grimes added, as though it was a mere casual afterthought.

Pat nodded pleasantly to the deputy sheriff from Bleeker. "Yore whistle must be dry, Mister, if you've just rode in. I'm buyin'."

He met a pair of cold gray eyes that were fixed intently on his face. The thin face of Ed Bemis showed unmistakable hostility. "Yo're Pat Stevens, huh? Friend of a couple of fellers named Sam an' Ezra?"

"You bet. Sam and Ezra and me are old trail pardners. You know them?"

"Not yet." The deputy showed his teeth.

The affable smile slowly faded from Pat's face. His features hardened. He turned his searching gaze on

Sheriff Grimes. "What goes on here?" he demanded. "You all act like I got the gallopin' smallpox."

Grimes said, "It's this way, Pat. Mr. Bemis, here, is lookin' for Ezra an' Sam. He's . . . got a warrant for 'em, Pat."

"A warrant?" Pat snorted his disbelief. Then his expression cleared and he chuckled. "I get it now. Bleeker is where that hawse-trader come from. Feller named Silas Wackett that bought a herd of saddle stuff from Ezra and Sam last month. I heard about them dyin' soon's he got 'em on their home range. So he's sent hisse'f a deputy down to arrest Sam and Ezra, eh? That's funny. That's shore enough funny."

But Pat suddenly realized no one else was laughing with him. No one was even smiling. He sobered abruptly, pushed his hat back on his head and demanded truculently, "What you lookin' like that for, Ed? *You* don't think Sam and Ezra *knew* them hawses was sick, do you?"

"I ain't studyin' none aboot that hawse trade. It's wuss'n that, Pat. Silas Wackett is dead."

Pat stared at his friend in consternation. "What of it? We all got to die some day."

"Sam an' Ezra was there when he died."

"In Bleeker?" A puzzled frown crept over Pat's face. "They didn't tell me they was goin' up there."

"I reckon they didn't tell no one," Grimes said slowly. "Looks like they sorta slipped off secret-like."

Pat nodded slowly. Like everyone else in Powder Valley, he knew the story of the horse trade. He said shortly, "I reckon they got tired of having Silas Wackett spread the word around that they was crooked as thieves. Rode up there to shut his mouth, I reckon."

"An' that," put in the Bleeker deputy coldly, "is what they did . . . with a bullet through the ol' man's back . . . an' him not even packin' a gun."

Pat Stevens stood perfectly still for thirty seconds after the shocking accusation against his friends reached his ears. During those thirty seconds the placidity acquired during a decade of peace and quietude slipped from his features. His eyes narrowed to slits, and his face took on a pinched, hard look. He slowly shouldered Ed Grimes aside until he confronted Deputy Sheriff Pete Bemis with his blunt jaw outthrust.

He said, "I take great pleasure, Mister, in callin' you a damn liar."

Bemis took a step backward. His thin face was contorted with rage. His hand darted to the butt of his gun and the weapon was half clear of its holster when Pat's right fist crunched solidly against the point of his long jaw.

He went sprawling to the floor and his gun skidded out of lax fingers.

The sheriff caught Pat's shoulders as the enraged rancher took a step forward.

"Don't, Pat. For God's sake, don't hit him again," he pleaded. "He's the law, Pat. You'll get in bad trouble."

Pat turned blazing eyes on his friend. "You heard what he said. Law or no law . . ."

"No, Pat." Ed Grimes hung on to his arm tightly. The deputy was sitting up with a dazed look on his face. Grimes appealed to John Bailey. "Grab that gun, John. Keep it till I can get Pat cooled off so's he can listen to sense."

"Listen to sense?" raged Pat. "Is it sensible to hear a man accusin' Sam and Ezra of shooting an old man in the back?"

"I know how you feel," Grimes soothed him. "But you've always been strong for law and order, Pat. You've always said the time was past in Colorado when a man could take the law in his own hands. You can't go back on that now."

Stevens' hard breathing slowly went back to normal. The flush of rage ebbed away from his bronzed cheeks. He nodded curtly. "Yo're right, Ed. I acted too hasty." He turned to the deputy who had regained his feet and was leannig against the bar regarding him with venomous eyes. "I'm sorry I hit you, Mister . . . but yo're still a damn liar."

"Wait, now, wait." Grimes pushed his bulky body between the two men. "I don't believe it either, Pat, but it does look bad for Sam an' Ezra. You can't rightly blame Bemis for thinkin' they done it. They were at the Crooked Cross ranch when it happened . . . an' skipped out. Ain't hide nor hair been seen of 'em since . . . an' another old man has disappeared too . . . feller named Cargat that was the only one knew they went to the ranch that night."

In sober tones, Sheriff Grimes quickly reviewed the evidence against Sam and Ezra as it had been related by Bemis, ending in a harried tone:

". . . No matter what you and me believe about it, the law's the law and I'm sworn to uphold it. Depitty Bemis has got a warrant an' I'm bound by my oath of office to he'p him serve it. You can't go back on me, Pat. You know they can't stay hid out forever."

" 'Twouldn't s'prise me none," Bemis put in viciously, "but what Stevens has got 'em hid out at his ranch right now. An' that makes him jest as guilty as them. There's a posse follerin' me from Bleeker, an' by Gawd I'll have 'em search the Lazy Mare to make shore they ain't hidin' there."

Pat paid no attention to the deputy's outburst. He was staring into Ed Grimes' eyes, his face set in grim lines, his own eyes hard and alert.

"So yo're turnin' against yore own friends, Ed? If that's the law I ain't havin' none."

"That ain't fair, Pat." Grimes' face was ashen. "You

know it ain't. Time an' again I've heard you say no man should be afraid to stand a fair trial if he was innercent. That's all I'm askin' Sam an' Ezra to do . . . give themselves up an' stand trial."

Pat Stevens set his teeth together hard and shook his head. "You know what kind of trial they'd get at Bleeker. They're judged guilty right now. They'd be strung up to a cottonwood limb the minute they got inside the county line. I tell you, Ed Grimes, if you help to arrest Sam an' Ezra you'll be committin' murder shore's the feller that gunned Silas Wackett."

Sweat stood on the sheriff's broad face. "All the same, Pat, I got to do my dooty like I see it. You helped elect me to office on that platform. I'm deputizin' men to guard their ranch an' if they come back I'll have to arrest them."

"I'll kill any man," swore Pat between his teeth, "that lays a hand on 'em."

Sheriff Grimes appeared to grow in stature. He spoke with quiet dignity in contrast to Pat's tone of angry defiance:

"I'm disappointed in you, Pat Stevens. People look up to you hereabouts, but I can't help that. It's my dooty to warn you that if you give a hand to help Sam an' Ezra escape arrest you'll be outside the law yore own self."

"You," said Pat bitterly, "and the whole pack of you can go plumb to hell." He turned on his heel and strode out of the saloon, and thick silence enveloped the room behind him.

Sally was standing at a rear counter in the general store and her eyes were starry with anticipation as she held up a length of brightly figured material to her face, looking in a mirror to see how well the color went with her complexion and thinking how Pat would compliment her when she got the dress made.

She heard the outside door slam open, and turned to see the tall figure of her husband stalk into the store. Her laughing call of greeting changed to one of dismay when she saw his grim face.

He spoke curtly, in a tone she had not heard for many years, "Put that stuff down, Sally. We're leavin' town."

She swayed back against the counter for support, all the bright color fading from her cheeks. And then, because Sally was the woman she was, because she knew her husband so well and loved him better than life itself, because she recognized that look on his face—she let the bright cloth slide from her nerveless fingers and went to him, forcing a smile to appear on her lips.

She said, "Of course, Pat darling," and linked her arm in his, then called to their young son who was wistfully eyeing the display of stick candy and gumdrops, "Come, Dock. We're going now."

She lifted her chin proudly and went through the door by her husband's side, knowing that something terrible had happened to change him like this, feeling the whispers behind their backs from the group of men who had emerged from the Gold Eagle and stood eyeing them as they got in the buckboard and drove away.

But she squeezed Pat's arm tightly and did not ask him any questions. She could feel the tenseness and the trembling in his strong body beside her on the seat, and her womanly intuition gave her to understand something of the terrific struggle that was going on inside him.

SEVEN

As soon as the main street of Dutch Springs was left behind and they entered the rolling open country of

the valley, Pat Stevens loosened the lines and shouted at the team of spirited bays.

They lunged forward in harness, into a gallop and then into a mad run when Pat did not tighten the lines but let them have their heads.

He braced himself in the seat as the buckboard swayed and jolted on the uneven road, darted a glance at Sally, who hadn't spoken a word since they left town.

Sally had one arm tightly about Dock and was holding onto the seat with the other. The rushing wind whipped the hair away from her face, and there was a queer, tense look of exaltation on her features.

There wasn't any fear; no hint of dismay or doubt. She appeared to strain forward in the seat, as though Pat's terrific inward urgency had been communicated to her and she was accepting it on faith, without question.

In a flash Pat remembered when he had seen Sally look like that before. It had been under almost similar conditions, the first day he met her at Hopewell Junction. The buckboard team had been two black mustangs on that other occasion, two range-bred saddle horses that had never been hitched to a wheeled conveyance before.

That had been Pat's first introduction to the real stuff that was inside Sally and he recalled now how he had marveled that a city-bred girl could sit beside him in the rocking buckboard without making any outcry while the team ran wild across the prairie.

Some of the grimness went away from his face, and was replaced by a sheepish smile. He tightened the lines and spoke soothingly to the excited bays, slowed them from a mad run to a swinging gallop.

He relaxed and covered Sally's hand with one of his big ones, said gently, "I'm sorry, old lady. You must of thought I'd gone plumb crazy."

Sally smiled reassuringly at her husband. She said, "I thought . . . you were in a hurry to get home."

Pat nodded. A wary, guarded look came over his face. "I am that." He spoke sharply to the team to keep them at their swift gallop. "It's Ezra and Sam," he jerked out. "They're in bad trouble."

Sally caught her lower lip between her teeth and waited for him to go on. He could trust her to understand. She knew and loved the red-headed, one-eyed Ezra and his smaller companion as only a woman very much in love with her husband can love her husband's bosom friends. She knew how close the trio had been in the wild, free days of their youth, and ever since marrying Pat Stevens she had striven to do nothing to spoil the fine comradeship between them.

"Seems they rode up to Bleeker without tellin' nobody," Pat went on after a moment. "That's where the feller lived that bought the herd of hawses from 'em last month."

Sally nodded her understanding. "The herd that all died of some strange disease as soon as Mr. Wackett got them home."

"That's right. I reckon Sam and Ezra figgered to put it to him straight that they didn't know the hawses was sick when they sold 'em." Pat paused, then went on doggedly, "But they didn't get to do no explainin'. Somebody shot the old man in the back 'fore they got to see him."

He went on to give Sally the bare facts of the situation as Grimes had outlined them to him, ending savagely, "And Ed Grimes has turned against 'em, too. Said he'd arrest me if I dared to give 'em a hand."

Sally put her hand on his arm reassuringly. "Everything will come out all right. You'll have to go up there and find out who *did* kill Mr. Wackett . . . then the

foolish charge against Sam and Ezra will be dropped."

Pat's jaw sagged in admiration as he gazed at his wife. "Yo're the gosh-darndest wonderfulest woman God ever made and put on earth," he told her solemnly. "I've knowed it a long time, but I keep on bein' surprised when something happens to make me know it all over again."

"Dock and I'll get along at the ranch fine," Sally told him cheerfully.

Pat whistled between his teeth at the horses to keep them galloping on steadily towards the ranch. "I'm scairt one of 'em will come ridin' here to fetch me up there," he confessed. "If they show their faces hereabouts they'll get arrested. And if you or me help hide 'em out . . . well, we'll be outlawed too, Sally. It's a bad mess any way you look at it."

Sally squeezed his arm tightly. "Seems to me I remember you being outlawed once before."

Pat nodded slowly. "I was thinkin' back to that time too. Do you remember, Sally? You went with me of yore own free choice . . . not knowin' how things would ever turn out. . . ." His voice was awed, as it always was when he recalled the perfect faith of a young girl who had followed her heart instead of her head, who had chosen the outlaw trail with him when things looked blackest.

"I'd ride with you again this time, Pat," she told him with a fierce throb in her voice, "if I could help Sam and Ezra any. But I can do more good by staying at home, keeping the ranch going. . . ."

"Then you don't blame me, honey? You don't think I'm doing wrong to set myself against the law?"

"Of course you're not. No man does wrong to stick by his friends. You've got to go, Pat."

"I dunno," he mused. "Things get bad mixed up in

a man's mind sometimes. I helped elect Ed Grimes . . . and here I'm turning against him when he's jus doing his duty the way the law says."

"It'd be different if we didn't *know* Sam and Ezra were innocent . . . and didn't *know* they'd get strung up without a fair trial if they get taken back to Bleeker," Sally insisted.

Pat nodded, but he muttered, "Most all outlaws get started that same way, Sally. Most of 'em get crosswise with the law when they're doing what they think is right. Then it's too late to turn back." He paused and added carefully, "If this Bleeker killin' don't get cleared up . . . there'll be no place for me and Sam and Ezra to ride 'cept the owl-hoot trail. We cain't never come back. . . ."

"But you'll clear it up," Sally scoffed. "You can't fail, Pat."

"I'm tryin' to make you see it clear, honey. We got to decide right now. I'm a married man and all that. Maybe it ain't fair to you and Dock for me to go off and help Sam and Ezra. Don't make any mistake, Sally. If things don't turn out right, there won't be no turnin' back. Yore husband and Dock's daddy will be branded a outlaw."

"If you think I'm afraid to take that chance, you're mistaken, Pat Stevens. You can't let Ezra and Sam down. You know how they depend on you. If it turns out wrong . . . *all right*. Ride the owl-hoot trail. I'll be proud to ride it with you . . . and Dock too."

Pat nodded humbly. He did not trust himself to speak. He was ashamed of himself for having doubted Sally for one moment. She was one woman in a million. With her backing him up, hell! a man wouldn't be much good if he didn't succeed.

The sun had sunk behind the western peaks in a

flood of angry color that portended a vicious storm before morning. The heavily overcast sky cut the normal period of twilight short, and there was an abrupt transition from daylight to black darkness as they neared the Lazy Mare ranch.

Lights gleamed from the ranch house and from the riders' bunkhouse when Pat swung the team into the yard. A puncher came from the corral to take charge of the horses. He detained Pat with a hand on his arm, whispering cautiously so Sally could not hear, "Lemme talk to you, Boss."

Pat nodded and said aloud to Sally, "Be in in a minute. I want to tell Joe what hawse to saddle for a long ride."

As they moved back out of earshot, Joe explained, "There was three fellers here just before dark, Pat. Tough-lookin' rannies wearin' plenty of hardware. They ast some right funny questions . . . 'bout you an diffrunt fellers you pard around with. . . ."

"Sam and Ezra in particular?" Pat asked sharply.

The young puncher nodded. "Them specially. Wanted to know when you'd be back . . . where you was . . . how long you'd bin gone. . . ."

Pat nodded curtly. "I know who they were and what they wanted. They left, huh?"

"Yeh, they rode away 'bout sundown. But that's a funny thing, boss. I watched 'em ride off, an' they split up when they thought they was out of sight. Acted like they was circlin' around to watch who come an' went."

Pat said, "Throw my rig on the blazed-face sorrel. Strap on my saddle gun, a full canteen and a saddlebag of oats. I'm ridin' far and fast . . . and I'm leavin' it to you boys to look after Mrs. Stevens while I'm gone." He slapped the astounded youth on the shoulder and turned back to the house.

Sally met him in the doorway with his gunbelts in her hands. Her face was pale, but wholly composed. Dock stood back behind her, staring with big eyes while his father strapped on the heavy gunbelts, conscious that something was amiss, but knowing instinctively that he mustn't ask questions.

Pat stepped past Sally and leaned down over the youngster, gravely holding out his hand. "I won't be back for a while, Dock. Good-by, son. Take care of Mother and do what she tells you."

"Y-yes, sir," Dock quavered. Then he drew himself up manfully. "You bet I will, Dad. And you give it to 'em, Dad."

Pat crushed Sally to him in a hard embrace. He said, "Talkin' ain't much good at a time like this. I hope . . . I won't have to send for you to come ridin', honey."

"I hope so too," she whispered. "But . . . if things don't turn out right . . . don't you dare ride off without me, Pat Stevens." She stood on tiptoe and strained her face up to him, then let go and stepped back when Pat released her.

He turned and went out the door without another word, and Sally Stevens closed it quietly behind him.

Pat found all of the Lazy Mare riders gathered at the corral in excited discussion when he approached. Their talk died away when they saw the heavy holsters sagging purposefully at Pat's hips.

The foreman stopped him to say awkwardly, "We boys reckon some sort of trouble's brewin', Pat. Hate to see you ride off alone on a long trail. We'd be proud to buckle on our shootin' irons an' . . ."

Pat stopped him with a gesture. In a tired voice he said, "You'll be hearin' all about it, boys. Leave yore guns hangin' on the wall and stay clear of trouble."

A rangy sorrel with a white stripe down the middle of his forehead was saddled and waiting. Pat stepped

into the saddle and reined him away into the road eastward.

The thick blackness of a completely overcast night enveloped him and his horse immediately. There was only the soft clomp-clomp of hoofs in the soft dust of the road to break the silence that was somehow ominous in conjunction with the starless blackness of the night.

Pat rode slumped easily in the saddle to save his muscles for the long ride ahead of him, but every sense was alertly on guard. He knew the three armed visitors to the ranch must have been members of the posse from Bleeker that Pete Bemis had mentioned in the saloon, and he had a hunch they were stationed out beyond the ranch in the darkness to intercept any rider who might try to come or go in the night.

It troubled him to think that he might be intercepted here before he even got well started. He didn't want to shoot it out with men who were only doing what they believed to be their duty. He had no real quarrel with any members of the posse sent to arrest Sam and Ezra, but he was grimly determined that no man or posse was going to prevent him from going to his friends' aid.

So, when his sorrel snorted and pointed his ears forward into the night, Pat was ready for that eventuality.

He spurred the surprised animal and reined him off the road, driving him at a furious gallop in a wide circle around the rider he suspected was stationed ahead.

He leaned low over the saddlehorn when he heard pounding hoofs take up the pursuit behind him, and waited for the crash of pistol shots and the sing of bullets that would clearly show the other was getting the range.

When no shots came, and when the other hoofbeats were unmistakably dropping farther and farther back,

Pat breathed a little easier and sat erect in the saddle again.

Then he heard a plaintive sound that floated faintly through the night from behind, the long-drawn "Hoo-ooo-ooo," of an owl—a signal that he and Sam and Ezra had used many times in the past when enemies were about.

He slowed his horse and turned his head to listen, frowning anxiously. If that was Sam or Ezra, there'd be hell to pay if the posse caught them riding away together.

The long mournful hoot came again and then again, and Pat reined his sorrel to a full stop, sent an answering call back on the wings of darkness.

The rider approached at a gallop from behind, and Pat slid his gun back in its holster with a sigh of relief when he recognized Sam Sloan's squatty form nearing him.

"That you, Pat?" came a cautious whisper, and Pat answered harshly:

"Shore it's me, damn it, Sam. What're you doin' here?"

"Come to fetch you back to Bleeker," Sam told him cheerfully. His gaunt-bellied mount stopped beside Pat's sorrel on wide-spread legs, drooping his head and panting heavily.

"Done wore this critter out," Sam explained. "Le's turn back to the ranch an' get me a piece of hawseflesh between my laigs before we start back."

Pat swore at him softly. "Damn it, Sam. You shouldn't have come here. They're watchin' my place. I thought I was dodgin' one of the guards when I circled out around you back yonder in the road. We'd better ride straight on. . . ."

"I won't get more'n a mile or so on this hunk of

spavined crowbait," Sam mourned. "I jest got to git me another hawse. . . ."

A hoarse voice ahead of them in the darkness interrupted him:

"Here they both are ahead of me towards the ranch. Circle in on 'em, fellers, an' push 'em back to the ranch. Stevens will turn 'em over to us quick enough when we come shootin'. He's got a wife an' kid there that he don't want shot full of holes."

EIGHT

"WHO'RE THEY?" Sam whispered tensely.

"Deputies from Bleeker," Pat whispered back. "Maybe we can circle in the dark an' give them the slip. Sink spurs into yore hawse . . ."

" 'Tain't no use," Sam mourned. "He couldn't outrun a broken-laiged snail. I rode that hunderd miles since las' midnight . . . an' I shore don't see how any depitties got here fust."

The movement of slow-ridden horses sounded ahead of them in the darkness, though they could see nothing. Fragments of words drifted to them as the three armed guards fanned out in front to intercept them.

"Them fellers are right," Sam said suddenly to Pat. "You cain't afford to get mixed up in this. You got to think of Sally an' the boy. Git back to the ranch, Pat. I'll ride up an' let 'em arrest me. . . ."

He jerked his horse's head up as he spoke, urged the weary animal forward, shouted cheerily into the darkness:

"Awright. Hold yore fire. I'm comin' with my gun holstered."

For one brief moment Pat Stevens hesitated. He

knew Sam's action was the only sensible decision—the only way to avoid shooting and probable eventual capture. But he knew, too, that it was a suicidal move on Sam Sloan's part. Arrest by the Bleeker men meant a hanging.

He spurred his horse forward and his hand instinctively dropped to the smooth butt of a holstered gun.

In a voice that was hoarse with desperation he warned the unseen riders ahead:

"This is Pat Stevens, you fools, and I'm on my own ranch. There'll be shootin' if you try to stop me."

"Don't do it," Sam groaned. "I tell yuh, Pat . . ."

But mocking laughter from the night-blackness interrupted him, "We'd as soon blast hell outta a friend of them murderers as not. If you want shootin' you'll get a bellyful."

A black, killing rage gripped Pat Stevens. He knew the feeling, but was utterly powerless when it had hold of him. He forgot that the armed men in front of him represented the law, that if he rode against them he was definitely aligning himself on the other side of the fence—that Sally and Dock would certainly suffer for his rashness.

As he passed Sam's trail-weary horse he grated harshly, "Get ready to sling lead, Sam. There ain't but three of 'em."

Orange flame lanced at him viciously through the night from his left. He leaned low in the saddle and drove his horse forward, replied to the blast with his own gun.

He heard Sam behind him shouting encouragement, then the figure of a rider loomed up in the road in front of him. They fired simultaneously and red-hot flame licked at Pat's neck muscles.

But the figure in front of him swayed in the saddle, and Pat drove his mount squarely into the other horse,

leaning from the saddle and slamming the barrel of his gun against the man's head as he fell.

The other men were closing in from the sides with guns blazing, and Sam was returning their fire as he drove his horse forward to join Pat.

Pat grabbed the dragging reins of the riderless horse in front of him, straightened in the saddle and began firing at the illusive targets that were only pinpoints of flame in the darkness.

A yelp of anguish sounded on the heels of his second shot, and firing stopped from the right.

The man on the left was coming in no closer, and his firing became sporadic as he realized the odds had now swung against him.

As Sam's horse stumbled up, Pat leaped to the ground and grunted, "Stop shootin' back, Sam. Let him waste his lead if he don't come no closer. He cain't see us."

Sam slid to the ground and trotted forward awkwardly on his bowlegs as Pat knelt beside the crumpled body of the man in the trail. He panted, "Got one of 'em, huh? Looks like a good hawse he was ridin'. I'll fork him an' let's us get the hell out of here."

Pat stood up slowly. The killing rage had gone away from him, leaving him weak and shaky. He said slowly, "Yeh, I got this one, Sam. And there's another one winged out yonder in the dark."

As he continued to stand there, acting dazed and unsure of himself, Sam said impatiently, "C'mon then. We better get out of here before somethin' else happens."

"Anything that happens now won't matter much," Pat muttered. He touched the skin-wound on his neck indecisively, then turned with bowed shoulders and mounted his sorrel.

The third member of the intercepting party was stay-

ing well back in the darkness, throwing a stray shot now and then, but making no real attempt to get in their way.

"Stirrups are too long," Sam grunted sourly as he swung into the saddle of the commandeered horse. "I'll stretch 'em soon's we get good away from here." The horse snorted and lunged forward as soon as Sam touched him with a spur. Pat let his sorrel have his head and follow after Sam.

There could be no turning back now. He was irrevocably committed to the trail ahead. One posseman lay dead behind him, and another one was wounded. He had even shouted out to them who he was, though no one would have been long guessing his identity anyhow after the facts became known.

A great weight seemed to pin Pat Stevens tightly in the saddle, and his mind felt numbed, incapable of clear thought. He remembered confusedly how he had warned Sally that just this thing might happen to set him apart from other men. It was so easy to get further into trouble once a man took the first step in that direction. He hadn't wanted trouble tonight. He would have gone to any lengths to avoid it.

Yet, even now, he didn't see how he could have acted differently. A man couldn't let his friends down. He couldn't stand back and watch Sam and Ezra get strung up for a crime he knew they couldn't possibly have committed.

Yet that posseman had only been doing what he thought was right also—and he was dead. It wasn't fair, Pat Stevens thought passionately. Right and wrong oughtn't to be mixed up that way so a man couldn't tell which was which.

But Sam was leaning back in the saddle to talk with him, and Pat shook himself free of his disturbing thoughts.

"You seem to know a hell of a lot about things up at Bleeker," Sam said sharply. "How'd you find out?"

"Talked to a deputy from Bleeker in Dutch Springs this afternoon. He's got a murder warrant for you and Ezra . . . and Ed Grimes is gonna help him serve it if either of you show yore faces in this county."

Sam swore loud and fervently. "I shore don't see how a depitty got here afore me. I dang near kilt a good hawse tryin' to reach you afore the news got there. It ain't human," he argued, "to ride that trail faster'n I did."

"Yo're gettin' so old and stuck-in-the-mud you don't know what fast ridin' is," Pat scoffed. It gave him a good feeling to be kidding with Sam as usual, as if nothing else mattered. "Them three possemen even beat you to the Lazy Mare by a good three hours," he jeered.

"You reckon that's what they were, Pat? Possemen from Bleeker?" Sam asked anxiously.

"I reckon there ain't no doubt about it."

Sam was silent for a long time. They rode at an easy gallop on the back trail, conserving the strength of their mounts for the long ride ahead, yet covering a lot of miles fast.

When Sam spoke again his voice was rough with emotion: "This ain't yore trouble, Pat. Turn back while there's still time. I'll ride on an' get Ezra . . . we'll head south for the Border. Shucks, it's time we was seein' some new country anyhow. We're plumb tired of settin' there in Powder Valley on a little ranch."

"It's my trouble now," Pat told him. "There's a daid man lyin' back yonder."

"I was thinkin' about him. No use you shoulderin' the blame for that. What's another killin' to me? They cain't hang me but once if they catch me. I'm ridin' that feller's hawse. If you ride back to the ranch now nobody can prove you did the shootin'."

Pat smiled grimly. He kept on riding at an even pace, and that was Sam's answer. "The big thing we got to worry about is who killed Silas Wackett," Pat said finally. "That's murder. Killin' that deputy when he was shootin' at me on my own ranch ain't murder. If we can get you an' Ezra clear of the fust charge we won't worry so much about the other."

"That's a fac', too," Sam agreed. He related the exact circumstances surrounding Wackett's murder, explaining the impulse that had prompted them to kidnap Dad Cargat and carry him off into the hills with them.

". . . An' we didn't know till we got him out there that it was too late an' he'd awready told about us askin' our way to the Crooked Cross. Then we figgered we couldn't waste time takin' him back, so Ezra's holed up with him in a little deserted slab cabin in a blind canyon in the mountains. They got grub enough for three-four days . . . an' Ezra figgered he might knock off a jackrabbit or two to make out longer."

Pat nodded glumly. The situation was worse than he had suspected. They didn't have anything to go on in searching for the real murderer, and the evidence pointed so directly to Sam and Ezra that there wasn't the slightest doubt that they'd be lynched at once if they were apprehended.

"We'll just have to start from scratch when we get there. Snoop around an' try to find out who wanted Silas Wackett daid . . . an' who might of visited him that night before you and Ezra got there. Why in tunket," he added harshly, "did you galoots ride up there anyhow? Didn't you know Wackett was sore as a boil about that hawse trade?"

"Shore we did. An' he was tellin' lies all over about us on account of it. You know we didn't sell no sick

hawses a'purpose, Pat. We figgered if we went to him man-to-man we'd prove we hadn't did it."

"That's one of the funniest things about it," Pat mused. "That hull herd of hawses gettin' sick an' dyin' for no reason a-tall. I wonder . . . could that . . . an' you fellers goin' up yonder . . . have had anything to do with Wackett gettin' killed."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't rightly know." Pat scowled in intense concentration. "'Pears to me it might all hang together some way. Him gettin' killed just before you got to him to make things right. See what I mean? Maybe it wasn't just accident that he got it just before you an' Ezra reached him. Maybe *somebody* wanted to make shore you didn't do no explainin'."

"By grabby, mebby so. But who? An' why? An' who coulda knowed we was comin'? We didn't tell nobody but that ol' man at the saloon."

"Somebody else must have knowed you were goin' up there."

Sam shook his head positively. "We didn't tell nobody on the way. Of course, some people back in Powder Valley . . . the boys on the ranch an' like that . . . we told them when we left."

"It's mighty damn peculiar," Pat insisted. "That's one of the things we'll ask questions about when we get to Bleeker."

"When you get to Bleeker," Sam corrected him. "Dang it, Pat. You know I dassent show my face thereabouts."

"I'm not goin' to be in such good standin' with the law neither," Pat reminded him grimly. "Soon as word gets back about the deputy gettin' killed on my ranch."

They rode on into the night enveloped in glum silence. The future, like the starless night through which

they rode, appeared black and foreboding—not pierced by a single ray of light to lessen the gloom.

NINE

THE FIRST DIMNESS of twilight, intensified by dirty cobwebbed windows which didn't let much light through at best, darkened the interior of the sheriff's office in Bleeker, Colorado.

The gloom radiated from Sheriff Lem Dillard's features didn't add any cheeriness to the atmosphere, and his chief deputy, Dead-Ear Collins, was being even more taciturn and less jovial than usual.

Sheriff Dillard had appointed Collins his deputy in Bleeker because Dead-Ear would sit silent for hours and let the sheriff pour out his woes in an uninterrupted stream. Dead-Ear wasn't actually deaf, but long ago he had come to the conclusion that most conversation was a waste of time anyhow, and he had cultivated the habit of not listening when people talked to him. That made him a perfect listener—because he never bothered to listen, and thus never became bored.

This evening Dillard had been sitting opposite his deputy with a scarred pine table between them, monologuing for a full hour on the inexplicable disappearance of two murder suspects from the ken of man.

"Damn it, Dead-Ear," he said with more than ordinary vehemence, "they gotta be somewheres. Full-bodied grown men can't jest disappear in thin air . . . or can they?" he sighed.

Dead-Ear yawned and began rolling another cigarette. He was slight of stature, with thin crafty features. He didn't answer the sheriff's rhetorical question because he was busy with secret thoughts of his own—

pleasant thoughts about the buxom figure of a new dance girl at the Palace of Pleasure up the street where he planned to spend the evening after Dillard got through talking his official troubles at him.

"Mebby they can," Dillard groaned. He had a pleasant unintelligent face, and he kept his mouth open to breathe through because his nose was continually stopped up with a cold. This gave him a petulant expression somewhat like that of a dead fish. The citizens of Bleeker had elected him sheriff because he was incapable of making a living any other way, and the town was tired of feeding him and seeing that his wife and numerous children had clothes to wear. He had been a pretty good sheriff because there hadn't been any crime to combat in Bleeker—up to now.

"Shore looks like that's what they've done anyhow," Dillard went on in his twangy monotone. "Three posses scourin' the hills for two days ain't found a trace of them. Folks are beginnin' to talk, Dead-Ear. They're a'hintin' that this here sheriff's office ain't bein' run efficient."

He paused and stared across at Dead-Ear in the dimness of the unlighted office with a look of reproach. Dead-Ear expelled smoke from both nostrils. His eyes were very bright. He was wondering whether the fat-hipped dance girl's body would be as soft to pinch as it looked from a distance.

"Not only that," the sheriff went on querulously after a suitable period of silence, "but they're blamin' me for not gettin' out an' ridin' in circles my own self. Seems like folks don't realize I got to stay here an' direct the hunt . . . get reports an' suchlike." He waved a soft white hand vaguely as though to indicate a scene of frenzied activity dominated by him, a ceaseless scurrying to and fro of couriers, the issuance of crisp orders

and detailed instructions to a vast army of searchers who would be completely disorganized if deprived of his leadership.

The thud of bootheels sounded on the wooden steps outside. The tall figure of a man darkened the doorway, hesitated for a moment, then strode forward into the gloomy interior of the office, asking curtly:

"Is Sheriff Dillard here?"

A much shorter figure entered the office diffidently behind him. Sam Sloan wore a huge peaked Mexican sombrero, and his swarthy features were darker than those of most Mexicans.

Dillard swung his feet off the table with a thud and leaned forward to peer at the speaker. "I'm the sheriff, Mister. You got business with me?"

"Sorta," said Pat Stevens. "I'm a Government livestock inspector from Denver. This here is my assistant, Pablo Gomez. Pablo's a graduate hawse doctor from the vet'rinary hospital in Mexico City an' knows dang near ever-thing there is to know aboot funny hawse diseases."

"Glad to meetcha." Dillard got to his feet hastily and held out his hand. "This here's my chief depitty, Dead-Ear Collins, Mister . . . uh . . . I didn't ketch yore name the fust time."

Pat said, "I'm right glad to make yore acquaintance." He turned to Sam who waited behind him. "Step up, Pablo, an' shake hands with the sheriff and his deputy."

Sam shuffled forward, ducking his chin in an abashed way and muttering, "*Si, señores. Mucho gracios por el favor.*"

"Pablo understands English all right, but he don't talk it much," Pat explained. "He's got plenty of savvy aboot sick hawses, though."

"We," said Dead-Ear shortly, "ain't got no sick

horses." He nodded as though that settled everything and settled back to finish his cigarette.

"I've heerd diffrunt," Pat said sternly. "We got a report in Denver aboot a whole herd that up an' died for no good reason. But you didn't send us no word on it, Sheriff. How-come you didn't send in a full an' complete vet'rinary inspection report to the head livestock inspector?"

"Me?" Sheriff Dillard gaped at him in consternation. "Why in tarnation should I bother my head about such things?"

"It's the law," Pat told him sternly. "'Cordin' to a Colorado statue passed las' year every sheriff in the state has got to fill out blank number seventeen thousand six hunderd an' forty-two if a hawse dies for any onknown reason in his county. Don't you read yore instructions sent out from Denver?"

"Well I . . . I reckon . . . I musta missed that un," the unhappy officer of the law quavered.

"He cain't read," Dead-Ear said. He threw his cigarette butt on the floor, got up and stalked out.

"Ha-ha-ha," Sheriff Dillard chortled weakly. "Dead-Ear's allus makin' his little joke. About them dead hawses, Mister . . . uh . . . Inspector. I reckon you mean that herd of Silas Wackett's?"

Pat frowned as though he tried to remember. He nodded slowly. "Sounds like the name. I wanta see Mr. Wackett . . . an' them daid hawses."

Dillard shook his head sadly. "You cain't get no help from Silas Wackett. He's done dead. Murdered night 'fore last by the two scoundrels from Powder Valley that sold him the sick hawses."

"Murdered? Do tell!" Pat Stevens sank down into the chair recently vacated by the chief deputy. Sam backed into a corner and lowered himself on his

haunches in perfect imitation of a leg-weary native of Mexico.

"You caught the killers yet?" Pat went on interestedly.

The sheriff shook his head. "Not yet. But they cain't get away nohow. I got fifty men deputized an' out lookin' for 'em."

"Got a good description, I reckon?" Pat drawled.

"You betcha. Won't either of 'em dare show his face in this county without he eats a bellyful of lead. A old man saw 'em the night they done it. He told Tad Grayson what they looked like . . . 'fore they slipped back an' killed him, too."

"Killed who? This Tad Grayson?"

"No. Dad Cargat. Leastways, he's done disappeared an' we reckon they got him. Cain't even find his body, though. Some folks hereabouts opinion mebby they're cannibals an' carried him off for food." Sheriff Dillard shook his head sadly at the revolting thought.

"That does beat all," ejaculated Pat. "What'd you say they looked like?"

"One of 'em's big as a giant an' red-headed an' one-eyed. An' that one eye of his'n shoots out pure flame when he's mad. Strong as a stud hawse, too. He picked Dad Cargat up by the thumb an' one finger an' dang near choked the life out of him. But the big un's kinda simple-minded, I reckon. Not right in the haid. The little un's the real mean one of the pair. Not much bigger'n a short slug of likker half drunk up. Got a black face like he might be half Indian blood. So they ain't got a chance of gettin' away. Not two like them that've got 'Killer' writ all over their faces."

Sam Sloan made an unintelligible grunting noise from his squatting position in the corner. Dillard turned toward him and asked politely, "What say?"

"He gets pains in his stomick," Pat explained hastily.

"Too much gas from somethin' he's et, I reckon. Don't pay no 'tenshun to 'im."

"Oh shore. Course not. Lotsa people is troubled thataway. Take my ol' woman. When she eats jest a smidgen of garlic . . ."

"Yeh. Tha's too bad," Pat interrupted gravely. "Mebby them killers have gone back to Powder Valley," he suggested.

"I thought of that my own self." Sheriff Dillard's chest swelled with pride, as though this was an exceedingly ingenious bit of deduction. "I sent one of my depitties a-hellin' for Dutch Springs soon's I heard about the killin'. Feller name of Pete Bemis . . . smart as a steel trap and twicet as tough. He'll get 'em if they make it back that far."

Pat said, "It's mighty comfortin' to know that the law is in sech good hands in Bleeker when there's murderin' yahoos like them two loose in the hills. Now, aboot that herd of daid hawses," he went on briskly. "Wackett bein' daid don't change things nohow. Still gotta find out why they died . . . pertecshun for other hawses in the state . . . so they won't catch the same thing."

"Shore, that's moughty fine," the sheriff mumbled. "Good idee, all right. Inspectin' daid hawses. Well, sir, I never thought the day'd come . . ."

"We'll have to look 'em all over," Pat interrupted. "Pablo'll get samples of blood an' stuff. He's a plumb whiz at tastin' daid hawses' blood an' tellin' what made 'em die.

"*Tastin' it?*" The sheriff swallowed hard and stared at Pablo with a grimace of revulsion.

"Shore," said Pat cheerily. "That's mostly what's the matter with his stomick, like I tol' you. Well, where are them hawses?" he ended sternly.

"I don't rightly know for shore. Wackett was pas-

turin' 'em on the Grayson place when they took sick. I reckon they're still there. Tell you what, I'll get holt of Tad Grayson . . . saw him in town a hour ago an' reckon he's still around. I'll get him to take you-all out to his place. . . ."

"That'll be fine." Pat gave him a shove toward the door. "You go an' hunt Grayson up for us."

As the sheriff passed out of the small office, Pat dropped into a chair and began laughing, holding his sides to keep them from splitting with mirth.

"Awright," said Sam Sloan sourly from his corner. "Go on an' laff. If I knowed how to cuss in Mexican . . ."

". . . Black like he was half Indian blood," Pat chortled happily. "Size of a short slug of liquor half drunk up. An' yo're the real mean un of the pair! Wait till Ezra hears that he's sorta simple-minded. He'll love that. Flame shootin' out of his one eye! Ho-ho-ho. Carried old man Cargat off to cut steaks off of . . . bein' short of food!"

"Go ahaid," growled Sam in disgust. "Laff yore damn fool haid off. I'll be a Mexican, an' I'll be a hawse doctor from Mexico City, but I'll be blasted if I'm gonna drink any blood from them daid cayuses. Not for you nor nobody else. You better think fast an' figger out a better way for me to tell what was the matter with 'em. Dang it, Pat . . ."

Pat said, "Shhh," just as Sheriff Dillard reappeared in the doorway. He had Tad Grayson firmly by the arm. The young man's face was flushed and he was hatless, his hair disarranged. He hiccuped and stared at them with round bleary eyes while the sheriff explained:

"Tad's moughty broke up over this business. He's sweet on Joan Wackett an' was ridin' with her in the hills when her daddy got killed. He's been drinkin'

more'n was good for him . . . time he was gettin' out of town an' sobered up."

"We'll sober him up," Pat promised grimly. "C'mon, Pablo. Get holt of one arm."

They got on each side of the drunken young man and led him out.

The sheriff pointed out Tad's horse and helped them get Grayson in the saddle, and stood in the street staring after them, shaking his head from side to side doubtfully as the three riders merged with the dusk that was fast turning into darkness.

He wandered disconsolately up the street to the Palace of Pleasure after a time, and found his chief deputy seated at a rear table exchanging coy pleasantries with a rouged damsel having the build and not much less poundage than that of a Percheron draft horse.

Dillard stopped at Dead-Ear's table and rubbed his chin meditatively. "I never did catch that big feller's name," he complained. "What'd he say it was, Dead-Ear?"

"He didn't." Dead-Ear's eyes glowed dreamily. He had just confirmed his suspicion that the girl's flesh was as soft between his fingers as it was to look at.

TEN

DARKNESS CAME on as the three rode out of Bleeker toward the Grayson ranch. Tad rode between Sam and Pat, slumped in the saddle and clutching the horn with both hands to keep his swaying body in position. Their horses were dead tired from the long hard ride from Powder Valley, and it took a lot of urging to keep them at a slow trail-trot.

The moon wasn't due to rise for another hour, and

the road that twisted through the foothills of the mountains was fast cloaked in utter darkness.

The three of them rode on together without speaking, because Tad was too drunk to converse with the men on either side of him, and there was nothing they wanted to say in front of him.

It wasn't until they had covered many miles and approached a dark-shuttered frame building at a crossroads that Sam cleared his throat and muttered in the Mexican tongue:

"*Un cantina, no?*"

"A saloon?" Pat interpreted for Tad's benefit. "I reckon that's what it is. Huh, Grayson?"

Tad lifted his chin, then let it sag back. "Yeh," he muttered. "That's Dad Cargat's saloon. But we can't get any whisky there no more. Dad ain't . . . he's not . . . nobody knows what's become of him."

Both Tad's companions politely refrained from correcting him by admitting they knew exactly what had become of Dad Cargat. They jogged on to the creek crossing where three cottonwoods were hovered together in a triangle, and Tad's horse turned into the creek and crossed it without guidance from his drunken rider.

When the lights of the Crooked Cross ranch showed through the trees ahead, Pat slapped Tad on the shoulder and guessed cheerily, "That must be yore place up ahaid. Quite some ranch, looks like."

Grayson raised his head and stared at the lights with bleared eyes, then shook his head. "That's not my place. Not yet. We got to go on past. That's . . . Wackett's. Silas Wackett."

"Oh. The ol' feller that got hisse'f killed?"

"Yep. We'll circle down by the creek and go on to my ranch. Don' wanna see Joan," Tad explained

vaguely. "She's mad at me since her daddy got shot. Blames me, sorta. Know how gals are."

Neither of his companions said anything. They followed a trail by the creek that stayed clear of the Crooked Cross bunkhouse and corrals. The trail swung away from the creek and climbed a gradual slope through heavy timber beyond the Wackett ranch. The moon was beginning to bulge above the treetops when they came to a wooden gate barring the trail.

"My ranch." Tad Grayson waved his hand vaguely. "Don' know what you fellows want, but you're welcome. Sheriff said something about you eating dead horses. Got lots of them here. You ought to get fat."

Pat slid off his horse and opened the gate. He held it open while Tad and Sam rode through. As he swung it back on its hinges he heard the sound of a hard-ridden horse coming toward them from the direction of Grayson's ranch. He was in the saddle again when a mounted figure appeared around a bend, silhouetted against the first night-light of the rising moon.

The rider jerked his horse up at sight of the three figures ahead of him. He called out anxiously, "That you, Boss?"

"Sure, it's me," Tad answered. The long ride from town had given the liquor a chance to wear off. "What's the matter with you, Joe?"

A young man edged his horse up close to them. His face was flushed and excited. "I was ridin' for help. There wasn't nobody at the ranch. I think I run into them two murderers in the hills."

"Whereabouts? What happened?"

"Hid out in that old log cabin built by them prospectors twenty years ago." The youth's excited words babbled out like a leaping mountain stream. "I rode by there about sundown, not thinkin' of anything much,

then I seen a saddlehorse staked out in the grass. I rode up close wonderin' who was staying there, but I didn't get too close before somebody took a pot-shot at me out of a window. I knowed then it must be *them*. I come ridin' hell-for-tootin' to fetch the posse."

A peculiar change came over Tad Grayson as he listened to the puncher's story. His face lost some of its ruddy color, and he wet his lips nervously. As soon as Joe finished, he burst out: "We don't need any posse for this. I'll tend to them. You take these fellows up to the ranch, Joe. I'll ride up there. . . ."

Pat had flashed a questioning look at Sam Sloan when Joe began his story. Sam looked worried and nodded. He kneed his horse close to Pat and muttered, "Sounds like Ezra's hideout, awright. I don't rightly know jest where the cabin is, 'cept it's up yonder in the mountains somewhere."

Pat made a quick decision. It was imperative that he save Ezra from capture and prevent the further loss of innocent lives. He caught Tad's bridle reins and said sternly:

"You ain't in no condishun to meet up with them killers. Yo're full of whisky an' couldn't hit the broad side of a barn at five paces. Sounds like my job to me. Mightn't be them two at all . . . but somethin' connected with these daid hawses I've come from Denver to see aboot. *I'll* ride up there . . ."

"No!" Tad Grayson was wildly excited. He tried to jerk his reins from Pat's iron grip. "I know it mightn't be them. That's what . . . well, leggo, damn you! You ain't got no right to stop me."

"The hell I haven't," Pat told him coldly. "I got authority from the governor. I'm takin' charge. There's somethin' mighty funny aboot this daid herd. . . ."

Tad Grayson's eyes blazed with resentment and fear.

He rapped out, "I'm going up there . . . by myself . . ." and dropped an unsteady hand to the butt of Silas Wackett's Navy Colt which he had worn since the night the old man died.

Pat straightened in the saddle with an angry growl. He drove his right fist to the point of the young man's jaw before he could complete his draw.

Tad's body went limp and he swayed backward out of the saddle.

"Hey there!" Joe shouted. "What you mean . . . ?"

"I mean what I say," Pat told him incisively. He leaned forward and caught the bridle of Tad's frightened horse. "I ain't hurt yore boss none . . . saved his life, more-like. It'd be suicide for him to ride up there full of likker. Jump down, Pablo," he ordered Sam, "an' throw him across the saddle. You take him in to the ranch while this young feller guides me up to that prospector's cabin. I crave to meet the gents up there that throw lead without warnin'."

"I . . . don't know who you are," Joe protested nervously as Sam got off and lifted Tad's prostrate form and tossed it across his saddle. "I think I'd better ride on to the Crooked Cross. . . ."

"Yo're takin' orders from me," Pat told him grimly. "Me an' my Mexican friend come all the way from Denver to han'le this sityashun, an' I'll han'le it my own way. You ride ahaid an' show me that cabin. That's all I want out of you."

Joe was unarmed, and he had already witnessed the methods Pat used in getting his own way. "All right, I'll do her," he agreed weakly, "but I'm turnin' back when we get in shootin' range."

"That," Pat assured him shortly, "suits me just fine." He turned to Sam. "Got Grayson tied on so he won't fall off?"

"*Si, si,*" Sam grunted. "*Muy bueno.*" He mounted his own horse as he spoke, looped a lead rope about his saddle horn.

"Then I'll be ridin' up with this lad. You make Grayson comfortable at the ranch."

"There's a trail turns off up here a piece," Joe explained nervously. "It's going to be a plenty hard ride up there."

"I'll be right behind you." Pat spurred his weary horse forward with an inward sigh of relief. It had looked for a moment like all bets were off, but now things were clearing up. This would give him a chance to warn Ezra that his hideout had been discovered—give Ezra time to duck out of there and find a new hiding place before Joe and Tad blabbed the news around and sent a posse out there to surround the cabin.

The moon was climbing high about the spires of pine and spruce now. Joe kept his horse at a steady trot and Pat had to keep spurring his jaded beast to keep up the pace. He hated to treat a piece of horseflesh so pitilessly, but this was no time to think of that. Ezra had to be warned in time.

The timber here was a dense growth, rising high on each side of the trail and pressing in close, so they rode in darkness with only a narrow slit of moonlit sky showing overhead.

Light showed ahead through the narrow groove of blackness, a faint silvery glow that resolved itself into a wide moonlit meadow when Pat pulled up beside Joe who had stopped on the edge of the wide clearing.

A steep rock cliff rose sheerly against the sky on the opposite side of the mountain park. The base of the cliff was enveloped in thick shadow, and Joe pointed that way, whispering.

"The cabin's over yonder. They ain't got no light

showin' an' you cain't see it, but that's where it is. The trail cuts in from that other side, an' that's where I was ridin' at sundown when a bullet come so close I felt hot air burnin' the end of my nose."

Pat eyed the wide clearing speculatively. It occurred to him that Ezra might have left the cabin hastily this evening after frightening Joe away. He would have realized that Joe would surely spread the alarm. The lack of a lighted window gave credence to that possibility. Still, Pat also knew Ezra's mulish stubbornness. It would be just like the redheaded Cyclops to refuse to budge an inch. It wasn't at all improbable that even now he had his one eye glued to an unlighted window just aching for a posse to come and try to rout him out.

Pat said to the young rider, "All right, Joe. This is my job from here on out. I'll wait till you get far enough gone so no stray bullets will reach you before I ride out where they can see me."

Joe drew in a deep breath and looked at Pat respectfully. "There's no way to get at the cabin without crossing that patch of moonlight. A man'll make a mighty good target. . . ."

"I said for you to get on back. Go on. High-tail it. If I ain't back in a hour . . . start a posse out here."

Joe hesitated, then turned his horse back in the trail reluctantly. Pat held his horse on the edge of the shadow until the sound of trotting hooves diminished and died away in the distance.

Then he pressed his mount forward into the moonlight, keeping both hands in sight on the saddlehorn in front of him, pouching his lips in a circle and sending out the mournful "Hoo-ooo-oo," that would tell Ezra it was one of his comrades approaching.

The doleful sound was echoed back to him from the encircling trees, but there was no other response.

Pat tried again and again, keeping his horse moving

toward the shadowed cabin at a slow walk, but continued silence was his only answer.

He was sure, now, that Ezra had taken alarm and fled from the spot with his prisoner. He quickened his tired mount to a trot, planning to investigate the interior of the cabin closely before turning back, to see if Ezra had left some message to indicate where he had gone.

The ominous crash of a six-gun smashed the night silence, reverberated loudly in the tree-circled glen, and the flash of exploding powder spilled from one of the cabin's dark windows.

The bullet sang away harmlessly in the air above Pat's head, but it was so unexpected that he had thrown himself from the saddle and lay prone on the ground with his guns in his hands before he completely realized what was happening.

There was only that single warning shot. No others followed immediately. Pat lay on his belly fifty feet away from the cabin, and he cursed Ezra savagely in an undertone while he lay there.

Why hadn't the damn fool heeded his owl-hoot warning? The only answer that occurred to him at the moment was that Ezra must have been napping and failed to hear the signal, had awakened to see a man riding toward the cabin.

He lifted himself cautiously on one elbow and sent the signal call out on the still night air again. He waited, but still Ezra did not respond. The cabin remained dark and silent. There was something eerie about the way that single shot had been fired, with no further indication that the cabin had an occupant. If Pat had had a few drinks he might have been willing to believe he had imagined the whole thing—but Pat was cold sober and he knew that bullet had been real lead.

and swung weighted gunbelts about his waist, growling at Sam:

"Rise up on yore hind laigs, Pablo. We got *mucho trabajo* this *mañana*."

"What *happened*?" Tad exploded.

"What happened where?" Pat countered innocently.

"At the cabin. The one where Joe thought the killers were hid out."

"Oh, there? Nothin' much." Pat waved his hand in light dismissal. "Seemed like Joe had made a mistake."

"You mean . . . it wasn't the killers at all? Some one else?" Tad's voice quavered with anxiety.

"The killers weren't there," Pat told him with finality. He left his explanation dangling like that so Tad would have something to worry about, turned to the kitchen, muttering, "I'll get a fire started an' coffee on. If you've got any hen-fruit about the place, me an' Pablo could put away a dozen or so."

Tad stood poised indecisively behind him, his jaw sagging open as though further questions were imminent, but he wasn't quite sure how to phrase them. When he found himself completely ignored, he turned with a sullen oath and went outside where he pumped cold water in a basin and doused his head in it.

Sam and Pat had cheery possession of the kitchen when he re-entered the house. He grudgingly pointed out a tin can full of fresh eggs, and Pat promptly fried all sixteen of them in hot bacon grease, loudly declaring that he and his Mexican partner needed sustenance for the job before them.

Joe came yawning out of his bedroom when breakfast was ready. The four men sat down together, and Pat and Sam began wolfing more than their share of the eggs in silence. Tad shuddered at the sight of food, and drank only huge quantities of strong black coffee.

He was obviously nervous and on edge, nerving himself to go on and question his two unwanted guests but not able to make up his mind how to start.

When Pat and Sam had finished breakfast in complete silence, they got up and Pat said:

"We're ready to take a look at them daid hawses now. Where at will we find them?"

"What do you want to look at dead horses for?" Tad asked desperately. "You can't bring them back to life."

"That's the law," Pat assured him sternly. "Like Sherriff Dillard told you last night."

"They've been dead for weeks," Tad protested. "They'll stink something awful. You can't ride closer than a quarter of a mile from that canyon where we rolled them without getting sick at your stomachs with the smell."

"We got strong stomachs," Pat assured him. "Where is that stinkin' canyon from here?"

"It's right east about two miles," Joe supplied for his employer when Tad hesitated, biting his pouched lips.

"It's on my property," Tad said suddenly. "You can't go traipsing around there without my permission. That'd be trespassing and I got the right to order you off."

"Go ahaid an' order," Pat suggested grimly. "See how far it gets you. We're lookin' at them daid hawses now. C'mon, Pablo," he turned his back and strode out the door. "We don't need no more directions from these fellers. Two miles east an' we had oughtta be able to foller our noses from there on."

Out in the early morning sunlight, Sam scowled blackly and said, "I don't understand none of this, Pat. What in hell are we gonna find out this way? We ain't even looked for Ezra yet. Why don't we ride out an' bring that two-gun hombre in an' settle things fast."

"I'm figgerin' he'll come to us." Pat loosed a coiled catch-rope from his saddle horn and eased out a loop, slid between the corral bars and whirled it lazily over his head which started the penned saddle horses circling the corral in snorting and simulated panic.

He tossed the loop deftly and it circled the neck of his horse. The instant the animal felt the familiar rope tighten about his neck he stopped meekly and walked toward Pat.

Sam roped the horse he had commandeered in Powder Valley and they led them out together, threw their gear on and mounted.

Neither Tad Grayson nor Joe showed themselves at the door of the ranch house as they rode away to the east. They rode into the timber without looking back, but as soon as they were well hidden from sight Pat checked his horse and slid off.

He explained to Sam, "Gonna do me some Injunin' to see if I got Grayson figgered right," and went on foot along the back trail to a point where he could watch the ranch house without being seen.

He remained at his post fifteen minutes, then returned with a wide grin on his face.

"Jest like I thought," he reported, swinging into the saddle. "Soon's we were out of sight Tad Grayson come bustin' out of the house. He throwed leather on his horse an' went spurrin' up into the mountains . . . headin' for that cabin I visited las' night if I don't miss my guess." He chuckled and urged his horse forward.

"Which means there'll purty quick be hell to pay," Sam prophesied dourly. "You told that man las' night you were in cahoots with him an' Grayson. Soon's he learns diffrunt, they'll both come a-gunnin'."

"That's what I'm hopin'," Pat agreed with a reckless smile. "In the meantime, we got to take a look at them

daid hawses. I got me some idees aboot them," he went on earnestly. "If I can prove I'm right we're gonna know the why-fors of a lot of things."

He went on to tell Sam about Joe's revelations concerning the poor quality of the herd of horses. "That's what he was tellin' me when you spilled yore coffee las' night," he chuckled.

"It's a damn rotten lie about them hawses we sold Wackett," Sam fumed. "Finest stuff ever raised in Powder Valley."

"That's jest what I know," Pat consoled him. "Something stinks aboot that hawse-trade . . . an' it ain't only daid hawseflesh, though I'm beginnin' to smell that too," he added, sitting up straighter in the saddle and sniffing the cool mountain air.

There was the clean invigorating smell of balsam and spruce, the sweet fragrance of wild flowers that grew in profusion in sunny spots, but mingled with those familiar odors was a faintly acrid stench that tainted the purity of the high clean atmosphere.

"Yo're right," Sam agreed with a sour grimace. "We must be comin' clost to that canyon. It's gonna be wuss'n a man can stand when we get real clost. Do we *have* to shake hands with 'em, Pat?"

"How else are we gonna find out anythin'? Don't forget yo're Pablo Gomez, the famousest hawse doctor in Mexico. Yo're due to drink some blood to find out what sickness they got," Pat guffawed. "Me, I'll stay back on the sidelines while you draw off yore blood."

"You'll go plumb to hell too," Sam muttered disgustedly. He turned his head aside and drew in a long breath, tried to hold it in his lungs as they rode forward.

The smell of decayed flesh was heavy, now, in the still mountain air. Their horses became increasingly nervous, snorting and tossing their heads in distaste as they were urged on.

The timber was very thin here, evidently cut over not so many years previously, and the grass underfoot was luscious and rank. They had reached a high plateau, perhaps a thousand feet above the lower level of the valley, and through the thin ranks of the timber they could see a high mountain range rising sheerly on the other side of the plateau.

"Over yonder," Pat pointed out, "is where the cabin lays that I visited last night. Not more'n four miles for a guess."

"This grass shore don't look like it'd make any hawse sick to be turned on it," Sam commented wonderingly. "Them hawses we sold Wackett would've shore liked to be sot down here."

"Yonder," said Pat, "are our sign-birds. I reckoned we'd find the dead stock pointed out to us so we couldn't miss." He nodded his head toward a dozen or more heavy-bodied buzzards circling in the clear blue sky.

"Yep. There's a break in the mesa ahead. The canyon they rolled 'em into, I reckon."

The stench of dead horseflesh was very thick now. The riders had to set their teeth hard to breathe it in without becoming nauseated. But they pushed on to the edge of a deep canyon cutting directly across the plateau, dismounted and inched forward on their bellies to look down at a terrifying sight.

The entire bottom of the steep-walled gulch appeared to be alive with carrion birds. There were literally thousands of them hopping about on decayed carcasses, fluttering into the air for short flights to reach a more tasty morsel, bickering among themselves for places of vantage at the feast.

It was here where Pat and Sam had stopped that the dead horses had evidently been rolled over the side of the canyon. The declivity was so steep it would be im-

possible for a ridden horse to make his way down with safety, but a little lower down the canyon was wider and more shallow, making an easier way to descend.

Sam and Pat drew themselves back hastily after one quick look below. "I seen enuff," Sam grunted. "Far's I'm concerned, I don't care *how* them bangtails died."

"My stomach is doin' flip-flops too," Pat admitted. "But we cain't stop here, Sam. We got to take a close look."

He mounted his horse and Sam reluctantly followed suit, grumbling that the buzzards could *have* the dang horses all to themselves if it was left to him.

Holding their breaths and gulping in the foul air only when they had to, they galloped down the canyon to a point where they could ride down safely.

In the bottom of the canyon where not a breath of air stirred, the atmosphere was so thick that, as Sam complained, it seemed to stick in the crevices between his teeth whenever he forgot and opened his mouth to breathe.

The buzzards were too pleasantly gorged to take flight as the men pushed their mounts close. They waddled away, flapping huge wings and uttering protesting cries, but were too lethargic to lift their heavy bodies in the air.

The dead carcasses were scattered out along the floor of the canyon where they had been callously tossed over the edge.

"I shore don't know what you expect to prove by this," Sam muttered as they forced their horses to go forward. "Like Joe said last night, you shore cain't tell a fine hawse from a hunk of buzzard meat when he's been daid a little time."

"Look how they're all stretched out on their sides," Pat said excitedly. "None of 'em layin' on their bellies

or backs. Seems like some of 'em would have landed that way, tossed over the edge."

"What of it? I tell you, Pat, my belly cain't stand no more of this. I'm turnin' back."

"An' every dang one of 'em on their *right* sides," Pat marveled, paying no attention to Sam's profane protests. "Now, that there's what I'd call a plumb miracle . . . less'n some feller came down here after they was dumped over, and turned every one to lie that way."

He was breaking out a loop as he spoke, and he spurred his horse forward close enough to one dead body to drop the loop over a stiffened hind leg.

He took a turn about the saddlehorn and swung his trained horse about, put a pull on the rope.

The dead animal was turned on its back, then flopped over on the other side.

"You an' Ezra branded on the right side," Pat reminded Sam. "Ride close to this one an' see if yore brand is on the under part where it cain't be seen."

Sam rode forward as directed, then began to curse loudly. "This critter ain't carryin' our brand," he declared. "This ain't one of the hawses we sold Wackett."

"That," said Pat emphatically, "is what I had figgered. An' I knew I was right when I saw 'em all layin' on their right sides so the brand wouldn't show. I'm bettin' you, Sam, that nary a hawse in the bottom of this gulch carries yore brand. Nary a one of these here mysterious-daid hawses."

The sharp crack of a rifle punctuated his statement. A bullet careened viciously off the pommel of Pat's saddle. As he instinctively threw himself to the ground, the heavier sound of a six-gun joined its voice to that of the rifle.

Sam threw himself from the saddle at the same moment, and they both threw lead upward toward the edge of the cliff where the shots had come from.

But they were trapped, and they knew it. Trapped in that awful charnel house piled high with the decayed bodies of dead horses and reeking with a death stench which no man could possibly endure for long without going mad.

FOURTEEN

EZRA CONSENTED to stay behind that first night and guard Dad Cargat only after a vehement argument, while Sam rode to Powder Valley to enlist Pat's help, and after Sam had patiently pointed out that it was practically impossible for the one-eyed man to disguise himself; whereas Sam would have a chance of slipping through the cordon of peace officers thrown out to prevent their escape.

Ezra was all for going with Sam, and shooting their way out if necessary, for the prospect of inaction was a goad to the big red-headed man; but Sam's wiser counsel prevailed in the end.

"It'd make things worse than ever if we turned Dad Cargat loose now," Sam argued. "He'd high-tail it right to the sheriff an' tell about us kidnapin' him . . . What a blood-thirsty pair we are . . . an' any chance we *might* have of clearin' ourselves in the Wackett killin' would be shot to hell. Nossir, Ezra, the best thing is for you to hole up with the old man an' stay hid till I can get Pat to come up an' clear up this mess for us."

So Ezra had reluctantly agreed. And Dad Cargat, realizing that he was a prisoner and there would be no escape, chose the lesser of two evils and guided them to a secluded shanty deep in the mountains that was used only in the fall by hunting parties. Dad was quite honest in his assertion that he and Ezra would be perfectly safe there, for Ezra gave him to understand that he

would get the first bullet if a searching party chanced upon them.

The faint dismal grayness of pre-dawn was in the air when Ezra stood in the doorway of the shack and listened to the clomp-clomp of Sam's horse fade away into silence. For perhaps the first time in his life the big man felt the empty sensation of utter loneliness inside him. It had been a hell of a shock years ago when Pat had broken up the trio by marrying Sally and settling down to respectability on a ranch, but that had only served to throw Sam and Ezra closer together, make them more dependent upon each other.

Though Ezra would have sawed off his right arm before he would have admitted it aloud, he felt like only half a man without Sam Sloan by his side. Though they bickered constantly and were always throwing caustic remarks at each other, there was a real and deep bond of affection between them, and this separation didn't leave Ezra in a good humor.

He took his ill feeling out on his prisoner when he turned back into the cabin and closed the door.

"Damn yore shriveled old soul to hell," he grated at the frightened old man who cowered back in one corner by the pot-bellied wood stove where a fire had been kindled. "This is all yore fault. If you hadn't shot off yore mouth to that feller about us, everything woulda been awright."

Ezra was a terrifying sight when he was angry. As Dad had noted before, it seemed that red flame issued from his single eye, and when his huge frame trembled with wrath it was a tremendous and awe-inspiring thing for a man to watch.

But the frightened saloon-keeper answered him spunkily: "I ain't havin' no truck with murderers. Why don't you shoot me in the back right now an' have done with it."

"Bah!" Ezra exploded. "There ain't no use talkin' to you. Well, seein' as how we're stuck here, you might's well make yoreself useful, for Gawd knows you ain't good to look at. Haul out that sack of grub an' fix me some vittles. Dodgin' the law is a dang hungerin' business."

Dad Cargat obeyed without argument while Ezra lowered his bulk to a wooden box and stared morosely at the cherry-red cookstove.

"You damn near cleaned me out of grub," the old man charged as he emptied the gunny sack of food on the floor. "There's enuff stuff here to feed a dozen men two weeks."

Ezra cast a disdainful glance at the assortment of canned goods and staples they had gathered up at the saloon. "I could eat all of it myse'f in two days," he rumbled. "I ain't rightly hongry yet, but I reckon I kin take on a little snack. Three-four cans of that stuff. Boil up some strips of bacon with it."

"Three or four cans fer one snack?" the old man asked, aghast. "There ain't so much of the canned stuff. Lotsa dried *frijole* beans, though. Maybe I better soak up a potful."

"Do like I say," Ezra growled. "I've et so many *frijoles* my belly tries to turn inside out when it smells 'em cookin'. There ain't no need to hoard the canned stuff," he went on angrily. "We ain't gonna stay here forever. Pat Stevens'll be back with Sam tomorrow an' he'll clear things up in a jiffy. In between times, I don't aim to lose no weight fer lack of food."

The old man obediently opened four cans of assorted vegetables, browned some strips of bacon in a pot and dumped the contents of the cans in on top. An exceedingly savory stew was the result, and Ezra cleaned up the last spoonful for breakfast after grudgingly allotting Dad Cargat a very small share.

After that, there was a long day to be got through. Ezra forced himself to stay awake, because he didn't trust the old man not to slip off if he closed his eyes, and he had too much innate decency in his make-up to tie Dad in an uncomfortable position because, after all, it wasn't really the old man's fault that he had to be kept a prisoner. It was the result of an unfortunate combination of circumstances, and Ezra was too fair to blame him for the innocent part he had played in contributing to their dilemma.

But staying awake was a wearisome business. No one came near the isolated cabin. It was shaded and half-hidden by a thick grove of tall lodgepole spruce, and as completely cut off from the rest of the world as though they had flown to an uninhabited planet.

To break the monotony of staying awake and guarding Dad Cargat, Ezra kept on eating through the day at short intervals, and he smoked almost continually.

The old man wasn't much fun as a companion. He was afraid of Ezra, and showed his fear plainly. He also loathed the big man because he firmly believed Ezra had murdered Silas Wackett with a bullet through the unarmed rancher's back. He spoke only when spoken to, and sat in the corner and drowsed when Ezra wasn't keeping him busy mixing up more succulent brews from the various cans of food.

Ezra welcomed the coming of that first night as a break in the monotony of the long stretch of daylight. They lit a kerosene lamp after Ezra had ordered the old man to cover the single window with several thicknesses of newspaper to keep the light from shining out. He further gorged himself on a heavy supper, and then was surprised to feel an uncomfortable lethargy creeping over him.

He couldn't understand it, not taking into account that he hadn't closed his eyes for more than thirty-six

hours, and had eaten more than enough food that day to sustain at least six men.

He caught himself nodding several times during the early part of the evening, and his eyelids began to feel as though they were being dragged down over his eyes with heavy iron weights. He smoked incessantly to ward off encroaching sleepiness, and drank quantities of hot black coffee until even his huge stomach would hold no more.

Far in the night, when Dad Cargat had curled up peacefully in his corner and was snoring loudly, Ezra found he could hold his eyes open no longer. He let them go shut, just to rest them for a moment.

When he opened them with a start, it was bright sunlight again. But Dad Cargat was still sleeping soundly, so no particular harm had been done by his relaxation of vigilance.

He aroused the old man and ordered him to sling together a huge breakfast, stubbornly paying no heed to Dad's warning that most of the canned stuff was already used up.

Throughout that long day Ezra kept himself awake the same way he had managed the preceding day. His supply of tobacco ran out in the middle of the afternoon, and he was reduced to the sordid practice of picking up all the discarded cigarette butts inside the cabin and carefully sifting out all the unsmoked grains of tobacco back into his sack. Some of the grains of tobacco were scorched, and others were rancid from being soaked with saliva before being discarded—but they still tasted faintly like tobacco, nonetheless.

And when he was ready for supper, there were no more canned supplies. Only some dried brown beans and a bag of wormy evaporated apples.

Ezra flew into a terrific rage when he discovered the lack of decent food. Insensately, he charged Dad Cargat

with deliberate wastage, and wouldn't listen to reason when the old man quaveringly retorted that he had warned Ezra the stock wouldn't last the way he was eating it.

Worst of all, none of the salt side bacon was left to boil with the beans. And *frijoles* cooked without some sort of meat to season them make about the most unpalatable dish known to man.

In desperation Ezra ordered his prisoner to cook up a pot of beans and wormy apples together—on the theory that the worms in the apples would provide the meaty taste so necessary to dried beans.

It didn't quite work out that way. Either there weren't as many worms as Ezra had anticipated, or their flesh didn't have the right taste to mix with beans and dried apples.

The resulting mixture was the most God-awful thing any man ever put into his revolting stomach. Even Ezra could not put down more than a couple of platefuls of the slimy stuff.

And afterward, his cigarettes didn't taste quite right. He didn't know whether to attribute the taste to the second-hand tobacco or to the taste of cooked worms that lingered on his palate, but he cursed both equally and at great length as the evening lingered on and he continued to get little satisfaction from his smoking.

That was the evening Sam and Pat arrived in Bleeker and went out to the Grayson ranch. The shots fired at Pat from the cabin Joe guided him to were heard clearly by Ezra and Dad Cargat across the two miles separating the cabins.

While the shooting was going on, Ezra was wild with anticipation. He had figured the time up carefully, and he knew it was possible for Sam to have returned with Pat—if they rode a few horses to death en route.

Listening to the shooting, he convinced himself easily

that Pat had already rounded up the murderer and was engaged in shooting it out with him. Though this reasoning wasn't so far from the actual fact, the immediate results weren't what Ezra confidently anticipated. As soon as the flurry of shooting ended, Ezra was sure Pat and Sam would hurry to him to say all was well and he could come out in the open again.

The hours dragged on and no one came. Again, Dad Cargat dozed peacefully in his corner and Ezra felt it his duty to stay awake and on guard. He had a queasy feeling in his stomach. He refused to admit to himself he wasn't man enough to digest a few boiled worms.

They were perfectly healthy food, he argued to himself weakly. They had been born inside those dried apples, and had lived on apples all their lives. Therefore, it was perfectly logical to presume that eating them wasn't much different from eating the apples themselves.

But his stomach didn't respond very well to logic. No matter how much he argued the subject out in his mind, he was still trying to be sick.

To top that off was the fact that cigarettes no longer tasted right, and his worry about Sam and Pat. He didn't understand why they didn't come to relieve him. It was worse than being in jail. Hell! if a man was in jail he knew *something* about what was going on around him. But Ezra didn't know anything.

And little remonstrances kept bubbling up in his stomach, threatening to develop into full-fledged rebellion at any time.

All in all, it was a completely miserable night. Ezra stayed awake because he could not go to sleep. He was in a particularly vile temper in the morning when Dad Cargat awoke, refreshed and cheerful.

He drank several cups of black coffee, but told Dad not to bother warming the bean-and-apple concoction.

He explained that he wasn't very hungry, though insisting it was very fine food and Dad should taste it for himself.

Dad declined with thanks. With dignity, he said that he'd gotten along a good many years not molesting innocent worms and, in turn, they had never molested him. The inference was that he was perfectly content to maintain that status quo.

To top everything off, Ezra finished smoking the last flake of tobacco after his meager breakfast of coffee. He had been carefully preserving each butt, pouring every precious particle of tobacco back in his sack and hoarding it like a miser, but the inevitable time arrived when all he had was one butt smoked down so low that it scorched his lips when he tried to draw further smoke from it.

That finished things for Ezra. He was through, by Gawd! Through nursemaidin' a ol' codger an' slowly starvin' to death while Pat an' Sam had all the fun.

Having declared himself firmly and with considerable rancor, Ezra strode out of the little cabin, never to return. He saddled his horse and mounted, rode away without a backward look, leaving Dad Cargat to shift for himself; and in such a mood that he didn't care what story the old man told the sheriff or a posse.

Shooting sounded over the plateau ahead of him as he rode away. He spurred his horse forward eagerly, hoping for any sort of action to break the monotony of the past days.

Then a horrible thing happened. As he grew closer to the sound of firing a strange and distasteful smell assailed his nostrils. His stomach wasn't in any condition to let him get too close to the canyon of dead horses. Yet Ezra was drawn to the gun-battle like an old firehorse is drawn to a conflagration.

He simply couldn't turn back.

And, suddenly, he was very sick. So sick he couldn't stay in the saddle. He rolled off to the ground and lay flat on his belly retching feebly.

Less than a quarter of a mile away Pat and Sam were fighting the most uneven and desperate battle of their careers, but Ezra could not have gone to their help even if he had known how badly they needed his assistance.

He was so sick he thought he would surely die—and fervently hoped that he would.

FIFTEEN

When Pat Stevens and Sam Sloan left the Grayson ranch that morning, Tad Grayson turned to Joe with an ugly oath. "I don't like those fellows, Joe. What do you think of them?"

Joe was young and impressionable. He shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno, Boss. That big one is plenty tough, I reckon. He rode up to that cabin alone last night when he thought them two killers was hid out in it. 'Twasn't his fault they'd awready took out to the high timber."

"What's that?" Tad whirled on him savagely. "Did he tell you that?"

"Why . . . yeh. Yeh, I reckon so. Sorta. I don't recollect jest what he did say when he come back . . . 'cept that they wasn't nobody there."

"He went up to the cabin and looked, eh?"

"I reckon so. Talked like he went inside and looked all around."

Tad's face became more grim. He'd worked himself into the middle of a bad mess, and there wasn't any backing out now. His suspicions of the two pseudo stock inspectors from Denver were intensified. What

had happened out at the cabin last night? He had to know. Had the two-gunned man actually gone before Pat got there? Or had the meeting held more dire results which Pat did not wish to disclose at the moment? If the man had left his hiding place, what did that mean? Tad had been protecting the man to save his own skin. If the fellow were caught skulking around the hills and forced to explain what he was doing there, it would be bad for Tad Grayson.

Everything had been all right until those two killers from Powder Valley appeared on the scene and killed Silas Wackett. That was the one thing that had upset all of Tad's calculations. He hadn't counted on murder when he let himself be dragged in on the deal.

"Saddle my horse," he ordered Joe thickly. "I'm riding into the hills."

"They ain't no need you lookin' for strays today. I was out all day yesterday . . ."

"Saddle my horse and don't ask questions," snarled Tad. "I ain't looking for strays. I'm going gunning."

He strode into the back room and hastily buckled on the old Navy .44 Joan Wackett had handed him the night of her father's death. He lifted down a dusty saddle-gun from wooden pegs above his bed, an old .44 that shot the same cartridges used by Wackett's Colt.

Carrying the short-barreled weapon in his hand, he strode out to the corral where Joe was saddling his mount. His saddle carried no leather boot for a carbine as regular equipment, so Tad thrust the rifle between two latigo straps and through the rear cinch ring, then swung into the saddle.

Joe stood back and shook his head speculatively as his employer spurred away. His eyes grew wider when he saw Tad was taking the trail up in the direction of the prospector's cabin where Joe had been shot at the preceding evening. There were a lot of funny things go-

ing on since Silas Wackett got killed. A lot of things a rannie like Joe didn't understand. But it wasn't any of Joe's business. A spotted cow was bawling in one of the corrals to be milked. Joe went to the house for a wide-mouthed milk pail and went on about his daily chores.

Tad lay along his horse's neck and kept the animal at a thundering gallop up the slope toward the cabin. He straightened in the saddle and slowed as he approached the fringe of open timber, gave the raucous cry of a jaybird and pulled his horse to a stop.

The call came back to him from the cabin. He rode boldly into the clearing and across to it, slid off just as the door opened.

He confronted a glowering face and the harsh rebuke: "What the hell you mean comin' here in daytime? It's dangerous as all get out. S'pose you was follered?"

Tad panted, "To hell with that," and stalked forward through the door. Inside the cabin he whirled on the black-garbed gunman. "Was there a fellow snooping around here last night?"

"There was one yestidy afternoon. I throwed a hunk of lead clost to his nose an' sent him humpin'."

"That was Joe. My hand. He rode by here without meanin' to. I mean later at night. A big broad-shouldered guy . . . with two guns tied low like yours."

"Oh, him? Shore. Him an' me had a right nice visit. He says right out loud he's plenty tough an' fast . . . an' me, I don't doubt it none. When this job's finished mebby I'll have some fun findin' out jest how fast he is."

"What are you talking about?" Tad choked out. "Did you get friendly with him?"

"Why not? We can use a man like that up here. Gawd knows, yo're a plumb total bust when it comes to git-up an' gumption. Them Powder Valley killers

have got to be rounded up . . . an' strung up . . . an' I reckon he's the man to do it."

Tad was breathing hard, his eyes big and round with amazement. "Do you know who he is?"

"I disremember did he tell me his last name. Pat's his fust. What do names matter?"

"They don't. Not names . . . but, what he *is*. Where he's *from*."

"Well, bein' sent up from Ringo is good enuff for me. Ringo knows what he's doin'."

"Ringo?"

"Shore. The feller what's runnin' the Powder Valley end for me. I forgot you didn't know about him."

"But that man isn't from Powder Valley," Tad exploded. "He's from Denver. Him and his Mex partner. Sent out here by the law to find out what made that herd of Powder Valley horses get sick an' die so sudden."

Tad winced and yelped out in pain as the gunman clamped fingers of steel on his forearm. "What's that yo're sayin'?"

Tad repeated it in a trembling voice. He drew back shakily when he was released.

"He's lyin' to one of us," the other mused angrily. "Lyin' slick as a whistle. There wouldn't be no need for him to lie to you . . . not if he come from Ringo like he said. But, if he *didn't*, he'd have plenty reasons for lyin' to me." He began pacing the floor and swearing strange oaths in a loud hoarse voice.

"Where is he now?" he demanded suddenly of Tad. "Him an' his Mex pardner? Are they at yore house?"

"N-no. They've rode out to look at the dead herd. I didn't want them to. I warned them to stay away . . ."

"You warned 'em? They'd pay as much heed of you as at a magpie scoldin'. If they take a close look they'll shore notice them brands . . . by Gawd! we got to

stop 'em. We got to do it quick. They smell a rat, awright. Shore as hell they do. Else he wouldn't of talked to me so slick las' night."

The gunman turned and ran from the room, darted around to the rear and threw his heavy saddle on a horse staked out to graze behind the cabin.

Tad followed him out more slowly, and was just mounting his horse when his companion swept around from the rear. Tad's heavy features were clouded with indecision. He reined his horse back as the gunman shouted for him to come on.

"I don't know about this," Tad protested. "There's liable to be shooting. . . ."

"Yo're damn right there'll be shootin'. C'mon, you cain't back out now. We got to stop them fellers."

"I didn't bargain on no shooting," Tad insisted stubbornly. "There wasn't nothing like that said at first."

"You'll be in it plenty deep if they turn one of them hawses over an' see the wrong brand," he was sternly warned. "This ain't no time to get scairt."

"I ain't scared," Tad defended himself. "I don't like killing. Seems like I blame myself for what happened to Silas Wackett. Joan won't hardly speak to me since it happened. If I get mixed up in anything else she sure won't like me."

"What's she gonna think if the hull truth comes out about them hawses?" the other jeered. "Which is best, you damn chicken-hearted lunkhead? Be sent to jail or he'p me blast the guts out of a couple of nosies from Denver?"

"If they're on official business like they say it'll be dangerous to start something with them," Tad demurred. "They'll go back and bring in more law. . . ."

"Not them two, they won't," the other derided. "Not after I get through gunnin' 'em. We'll leave 'em lay

right there in the gulch with them dead hawses. The buzzards'll pick their bones fast enuff an' won't nobody ever know what's become of 'em."

Despite himself, Tad Grayson blanched at this cold-blooded program. He said, "No. I'm not having any part in it. You go ahead, but I'm staying clear."

"You just think you are." The other rode close to him, his jaw ominously outthrust, one hand resting lightly on the butt of a gun. "I've got my own way of dealing with cowards that're afraid to finish what I start. Mebby you'd like to have yore carcass picked clean by them scavenger birds."

Tad Grayson was close to death, and he knew it. There was utter ruthlessness in the other's bearing. For the first time in his life the youth knew the meaning of abject fear. For the first time he realized the true dangerousness of the position he was in. That first step had been so easy—and had looked so safe. He hadn't foreseen any such development as this.

But he had good stuff inside him. A spark of manhood that refused to be bullied into committing an outright lawless act. He reacted spunkily, though with foolish daring:

"Go ahead and draw. You can't make me do anything. You can kill me here and now, but that won't make me."

His older companion hesitated a moment. He realized that Tad had reached the breaking point, that the lad could be forced no further. He tried, instead, soft persuasion:

"I don't want to make you do anything, Tad. It's you I'm worrying about mostly. It's you that'll be in a heap of trouble if them Denver yahoos ain't stopped quick. What do I care what they find? No one knows me hereabouts. All I got to do is ride like hell, an' my

skirts are clean. But yo're sweet over Joan. What chance you got of gettin' her if the hull truth comes out?"

"Well, I . . . I can't help that, I reckon. I'll just have to take my medicine."

But Tad was beginning to weaken. The other man saw it, and pressed his advantage:

"No you don't. Not if you've got any sense, you don't. You got a right to chase them off yore ranch. If they don't chase, you got a right to start shootin'. The law'll back you up in that."

"That's right. That's what I told them this morning but they didn't pay no heed."

"Of course they didn't. They figgered they had you buffaloed. Right now, they're laffin' at how easy you scared off. Le's show 'em diffrunt. You an' me. We'll show 'em, by golly, a man's still got some rights on his own ranch. I'll be right with you. There won't be nothin' to be scairt of. C'mon. Le's be ridin'."

The gunman struck spurs to his horse and galloped away without looking back. Inspired by his argument, Tad Grayson weakly followed. He didn't *want* trouble, he argued to himself unhappily, but the other was right. A man could defend his own property. It was right and legal that he should. Why, if it came right down to the law of it, he had a sort of official standing himself. Sheriff Lem Dillard had deputized him to hunt for the Powder Valley men. If worst came to worst, he might testify that he thought these two men were the murderers the whole countryside was seeking.

After thus assuaging his conscience, Tad rode on at a gallop beside the man who had first led him from the path of honesty.

Together, they reached the edge of the steep canyon where the air was putrid with the stench of decayed flesh, and with his saddle-gun he threw the first shot

downward at Pat and Sam a moment after they had made their amazing discovery that the dead horses did not carry the brand Sam and Ezra had burned into the skin of every horse Silas Wackett had purchased from them.

SIXTEEN

THERE WAS hell to pay in the bottom of that death-ridden canyon when lead first began to fly. Instinctively, Pat and Sam lunged for the nearest cover, which happened to be the bodies of two dead horses, and they crouched low behind the gruesome barriers while bullets spatted into the dry skin and decayed flesh in front of them. The round hole made by each bullet immediately became a vent for escaping gas that had been stored up inside the animals, and the heavy stench of putrefaction was increased a thousand fold as the nauseating gas escaped in increasing volume.

But they had to stay crouched there behind the dead animals. To move away meant exposing themselves to a hail of leaden death from the lip of the canyon above.

After that first flurry of bullets which had miraculously missed them both, their attackers drew back out of gun-sight and left nothing for the two trapped men to aim at except the muzzles of a rifle and six-gun protruding over the edge. Each time either Pat or Sam attempted to wriggle into a position for better shooting a warning bullet thudded into the carcass in front of him, a deadly hint that if they exposed themselves for a moment the bullets would find a mark in their bodies instead of being wasted on dead horses.

Pat reholstered his drawn gun in disgust when it was plain he was only wasting lead by pressing the trigger.

He slouched back flat on the ground behind the dead horse he had chosen for protection, and cautiously looked around to see how Sam was making out.

Despite the deadly seriousness of their plight, Pat laughed aloud at what he saw.

Sam was crouched behind the bloated belly of a horse six or eight feet away. He had lost his Mexican sombrero in his leap to safety, and strands of long black hair framed his black countenance. His features were screwed up in an expression of intense loathing and he had both hands clamped desperately over his mouth. His belly was heaving, and even as Pat started laughing Sam stretched out suddenly and lay face down in the soft sand, jerking his hands away from his mouth while his outraged system gave up every particle of undigested food that was inside him.

He lay on the ground retching feebly after the first acute nausea had passed, and Pat was suddenly ashamed of himself for laughing at his friend's predicament.

"Hold everything," he shouted with sudden seriousness. "I'm gonna throw a blast of lead, then dive over there with you."

"I ain't got nothin' left to hold," Sam groaned. "I don't care what you do, but me, I'm gonna take my chances against that rifle an' six-gun in a minute. Life ain't wuth no effort, the way I feel now."

"Make room for me beside you," Pat warned him. He drew himself up on both haunches and drew his guns. Without allowing any part of his body to show above the horse's carcass, he tilted the barrels over the top and triggered them rapidly.

A rain of lead replied to the double gunburst. He waited an instant until the fire from above slackened, then threw his agile body sideways toward Sam.

Bullets kicked up dust under him as he slithered across the small patch of open ground, but he rolled

into a place of safety close to Sam without being struck.

"Now what?" grunted Sam sourly. "If you think this daid nag is any sweeter smellin' than the one you've been swallerin' the perfume from, yo're dang well mistaken."

"You got nothin' to worry about now," Pat told him gravely. "Yore belly has done did its damnedest. Now, me, I'm plenty oneasy under my belt."

Characteristically, neither of them spoke of the real danger from the guns above them. They had often faced death before, but this was the first time the threat of death had ever been accompanied by such an unpleasant foretaste of what was in store for them if a stray bullet found its mark.

"Fust time I been sick since me an' Ezra raided that undertakin' parlor in Cheyenne for a lark an' drunk up a year's supply of embalmin' fluid," Sam grunted. "Wisht to Gawd I had me a few gallons of that stuff to shoot into these here daid hawses," he ended sourly.

"They been daid too long for embalmin' fluid to have any effect," Pat opinioned. He inched around to the dead horse's rump and peered cautiously upward. "There ain't but two of 'em, I reckon. Tad an' that feller I talked to las' night."

"The one you hoped would come out of hidin' after us," Sam reminded him bitterly. "Well, you got yore hope. I reckon yo're satisfied."

"Not quite," Pat admitted. "I'd be better satisfied if we had them cooped up down here an we was on top where they are."

"If they knowed how good it smells down here, I reckon they'd be down in a jiffy," Sam growled sarcastically. "Whyn't you yell up an' tell 'em?"

"I got a better idee. The wall of the canyon is right straight up an' down where they're at. If we could duck across to the base of it, they couldn't shoot down at us

without leanin' over to aim . . . an' we could drill 'em so full of holes they wouldn't be able to vomit when they hit bottom."

"Shore. An' if a cow had wings she could fly like a bird," Sam retorted. "It's thutty feet across to the bottom of the cliff. You reckon they'll play tiddlywinks while we're gettin' over there safe?"

"Not hardly," Pat conceded. His gray eyes glinted with reckless determination. "Yore belly's empty an' you can scoot fast. Get ready to run for it. When you say the word I'll rise up an' toss hot lead with both hands. While they're shootin' at me you can make it across."

"Then what'll you do?"

"If I ain't so weighed down with lead that I cain't run, it'll be easy. Once yo're set there where you can aim up without bein' shot at you can keep 'em back from the edge where they cain't lay their sights on me while I make it to you."

"An' supposin' you are weighted down with lead so you cain't run?"

"Then we'll both be better off than we are now," Pat told him shortly. "You'll be where you can breathe again . . . an' I won't be worryin' none about breathin' this stinkin' air."

Sam did not argue with Pat, though he knew the chances were ten to one that Pat wouldn't live through the experiment. It was that unquestioning acceptance of leadership that had made the trio an unbeatable combination in the past. It would have been the heroic thing for Sam to refuse to let Pat take the chance—but it also would have been an admission that they were defeated. It was better for one of them to remain alive to fight on than for both to perish miserably where they were. Heroics were all right for some people, but

they didn't win battles. It was this hard-headed realism that made Ezra, Pat and Sam different from other men.

Sam nodded agreement and grinned. "If you kick the bucket, I'll tell Sally you died thinkin' of her . . . an' when Dock grows big enuff I'll bring him out here to shed a tear on where his pappy died."

He gathered his short legs up under him and leaned forward with his weight resting lightly on his fingertips like a trained runner waiting for the starting gun.

The signal that sent him dashing into the open was a simultaneous blast from Pat's two guns with an answering shower of lead from above.

Sam drove himself forward, bent almost double, without wasting a moment to look upward. His short legs churned like steam-driven pistons and he dived the last ten feet to the base of the cliff like a base-runner stealing home in the World Series.

He rolled over on his side and unlimbered his gun, threw one well-aimed shot upward at the two figures he saw leaning far over the edge directly above him. They jerked back out of sight, and a yelp of pain attested to his accuracy.

He looked back at the point he had just left, but could see nothing of Pat. Despite all his pretended composure there was a sinking emptiness in his belly when he called:

"How's it, Pat? They load you too full of lead to make it over here?"

"Hell no," was the instant response from behind the dead horse. "I ain't more'n a few pounds overweight. Caught a few slugs here an' there, but most of 'em went right on through. Get yore gun loaded full an' yell for me to come."

Sam squatted complacently at the foot of the cliff and exchanged the empties in his .45 for loaded car-

tridges. He sensed rather than saw movement above him, and flipped a soft-nosed slug upward just as a sort of warning, then sang out:

"Come a-runnin' with yore tail up an' yore head down."

Pat followed directions as best he could. He came at a slow trot, and Sam knew he was more badly wounded than he had admitted. But Sam kept a barrage going that prevented the attackers from drawing a fresh bead on Pat, and in a moment his partner slumped down beside him breathing uneasily.

Pat's right shirt sleeve was soaked with fresh blood, and he had one hand clamped tightly to a flesh wound in his left side, but he was otherwise intact.

He maneuvered himself in position to get his left gun working, and Sam bandaged his wounds with strips torn from his own shirttail.

"Dang near as good as new," he told Pat cheerfully when he was done. He squatted beside Pat and reloaded his gun. "What's next?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"It's sort of nip an' tuck right now," Pat pointed out. "They can't get at us, an' we can't hurt them none."

"Nice an' shady here," Sam said languidly, resting his back against the stone cliff. "An' that stink ain't so bad here . . . or I'm gettin' used to it. Sort of satisfyin', you might say." He paused to sniff the death-laden air deeply. "I reckon a man could live on that smell . . . t bein' so thick in the air. Had any way to catch it in a pot a man could cook himself up a right tasty stew."

"If they're smart," Pat prophesied slowly, "both of 'em won't stay up there long. If *I* was on top, I'd send the one with the rifle around to the other side in a wide circle where six-guns won't carry. He could set himself up on that hill yonder an' pick us off with a rifle like Dock knocks prairie dogs over with his twenty-two."

"Mebby," said Sam hopefully, "they ain't very smart."

"That kind of hopin' ain't worth a damn," Pat retorted. "We got to stay two jumps ahead of 'em, an' be ready for whatever they figger out."

A gun leaped into his hand as he finished speaking. He triggered two quick shots upward before Sam got his neck craned up to see what was going on.

"One of 'em peeked over to see was we still here," Pat explained grimly. "One more peek like that an' I'll give the buzzards some fresh meat to work on."

"I could mebby slide down along the bottom of the cliff one way or t'other," Sam suggested after some thought. "Then if they tried to circle I might 'sprise 'em by bein' in range."

"For onct," Pat applauded, "you've used yore haid for somethin' besides a place to hang yore hat. Get movin' down the canyon, an' be quiet about it so they won't hear you go. If you can get three or four hundred yards down that way . . ." He paused abruptly, cocked his head to listen, then vented a disgusted oath when the sound of a horse's hoofs came down clearly.

"It's too late now. One of 'em's ridin' down to cross over. You know any prayers?"

Sam grinned crookedly. "None that you don't know."

They both leaned back and rolled cigarettes. Sam struck a match and held it to the end of Pat's cigarette first, then to his. He gesticulated lazily with the burning match stick.

"Yo're damn good at figgerin' things out," he complimented. "There goes that Grayson young-un ridin' acrost the canyon jest like you said he'd do. Soon as he tops out above yonder we'll taste lead shore enuff."

Pat nodded calmly, emitting a thin trickle of smoke from both nostrils and squinting at the mounted figure of Tad Grayson crossing the canyon far beyond the

carry of their short guns. "Won't be nobody now to tell Sally I went to hell thinkin' of her," he mourned.

"She'll guess it," Sam comforted him. "Hell! you ain't thought of very much else since you up an' married her when she was fresh a widder."

Tad Grayson's horse climbed the far side of the canyon and disappeared from sight beyond the edge.

Both men sucked on their cigarettes and waited. There was a high ridge a quarter of a mile beyond the canyon, a perfect vantage point for a rifleman to get a rest for his weapon and aim directly down at them.

With the other gunman still stationed directly above them, there was no chance to cross the floor of the canyon where the edge would protect them from rifle fire. Actually, there was nothing to do except await the end.

Pat sighed and threw his cigarette butt away. "I've always knowed I'd have to get it some time, but I hate to sit here an' wait for a man to train his sights on me." He pushed himself up painfully, turned his gaze upward to the steep slope above.

"There's some crevices and jutting rocks that'd give handholds," he muttered. A man *might* make it up to the top."

"An' get picked off by Grayson's rifle when he was half-way up?"

"That wouldn't be any worse than sittin' here waitin' for it," Pat told him quietly. He holstered his guns and tightened his belts.

Sam swore at him angrily. "Yo're shot two or three places, you damn galoot. I'll do the climbin'." He pushed Pat aside and grimly started up on the perilous climb which he expected momentarily to be interrupted by a rifle bullet from the ridge beyond the canyon.

Pat stood on widespread feet below and watched him worm his way upward. It was a foolhardy attempt, but

they were marked for death anyway, so it didn't seem to matter much.

He heard a burst of gunfire from behind his back and waited for Sam to fall with a rifle bullet in him.

But Sam continued to inch his way upward, and no bullets richocheted away from the cliff about him.

Pat turned his head and surveyed the ridge where he expected to see Tad Grayson ensconced.

He could not see Grayson. There was another burst of gunfire from that direction, but still no bullets came their way.

And Sam was nearly to the top. As soon as he thrust his head over the edge he would face the withering fire of the black-garbed man's two guns.

Pat leaped away from the protection of the bottom of the cliff with a ringing war-whoop to encourage Sam.

He had both guns out and he pumped bullets upward over Sam's head.

A heavy burst of fire from two guns replied from above.

Then Sam was scrambling over the edge, and in an instant he was out of Pat's sight.

Still, inexplicably, Tad Grayson's rifle had not reentered the fight.

Pat started back unsteadily toward the base of the cliff. He swayed and fell on his knees, and then forward on his face. He didn't hear Sam's shout to him, didn't know that all the laws of chance had been upset by the stout fighting hearts of a pair of men who didn't know when they were whipped.

SEVENTEEN

EZRA LAY flat on his belly and forgot about everything for a long time. He was completely wretched. He could

dimly hear the sound of firing from some distance away, but it didn't seem to mean anything to him any more. Nothing meant anything to him.

The dead-horse stench wasn't quite so bad close to the ground. By keeping his face down, almost buried in the hot sand, he was able to draw air into his lungs without expecting every breath to be his last. He was terrifically sleepy after the first spasm of sickness had passed and left him as weak as a wrung-out dishcloth. It was good to lie there face down on the sand and not care what happened.

Then he heard a horse coming toward him at a slow gallop. A horse with a rider, for an unridden horse wouldn't move at that pace. He would either walk or trot or run madly, but only the compulsion of spurs together with the hindrance of a curb bit could make a Western horse take that slow lope Ezra was hearing.

He lay on his belly without moving and let the horse come closer. For the moment he had forgotten he was a fugitive from the law and that any man who saw him was likely to start shooting without wasting any time for questions.

He had a hazy idea that the approaching rider was either Pat or Sam. While he had no real reason for expecting either of them to be in the vicinity, the idea was firmly planted in his mind that they were tangled up with the shooting he had heard.

He rolled over on his back and sat up.

Tad Grayson was a hundred yards away, riding at a lope and holding his rifle in his left hand.

The youth's mouth sagged open when he saw the monstrous apparition suddenly appear to rise up from the very ground in front of him.

Ezra's red hair flamed in the hot sunlight, and his facial disfigurement gave him a look of terrifying brutality.

Tad recognized him in a single glance from Dad Cargat's vivid description.

He checked his horse and frantically tried to get his rifle leveled at the big man sitting on the ground in front of him.

Ezra had not seen Tad before. He was stupefied for a moment by the unfriendly action of the young man. But his instinctive reaction to the threat of the leveled rifle was faster than conscious thought. He whipped out his gun and fired from the hip. The bullet struck the firing mechanism of Tad's rifle and the shock smashed the weapon from the young man's hands.

Ezra swayed up to his feet, bellowing angrily. He looked ten feet tall to Tad Grayson. What chance did a man have when crazy galoots rose up out of the ground like that and shot rifles out of a fellow's hand? He supposed the one-eyed man's pardner was lurking around close waiting for a chance to finish him off.

All at once Tad realized he had his bellyful of man-hunting. He spurred his horse away in a desperate retreat, and behind him Ezra's angry bellowing changed into raucous laughter. The red-headed man emptied his six-gun in the air for the sheer perverse pleasure of seeing the fleeing Tad whip his horse to a faster pace away from there every time a shot sounded.

Ezra was wide awake now. He figured it was time he was getting in on the rest of the fun. He hurried to his horse who had remained patiently ground-tied all the time he was sick, and took up Tad's back-trail that led down into the canyon some distance from where Pat and Sam had put up their valiant stand.

He heard a final blast of gunfire as he crossed the canyon, and saw Pat reel back toward the base of the cliff and fall flat on his face.

He knew he couldn't possibly be any sicker than he'd already been, so he spurred toward the pile of rotting

carcasses, dismounted and leaned over Pat's prostrate body. A quick examination revealed only a few superficial wounds, and he was just straightening up from the look when Sam's voice rolled down from above:

"Pat! Are you awright, Pat?"

"Shore, he's awright," Ezra roared back. "Turned sissy, that's all, from livin' off the fat of the lan' all these years with Sally coddlin' him."

"Ezra?" Sam yelled back happily. "What are you doin' down there?"

"I got a mite hongry in the cabin an' came prospectin' for food," Ezra retorted. "Smells so good here I decided to pitch my tent. Throw a rope down, you dang fool," he added in a changed tone. "I'll tie it around Pat an' we'll h'ist him up."

He waited until the looped end of a lariat came slithering down from above, then slipped the noose under Pat's arms and stood back, shouting, "Awright. Take him away."

Above, Sam had the other end of the rope knotted about his saddlehorn. He slowly rode his horse away from the canyon and Pat's body went bumping up along the rock face of the cliff. The rough battering brought consciousness back to him, and by the time he was slammed against the lip of the cliff and jerked over to solid ground he was filling the air with sulphurous profanity.

Ezra grinned happily as Pat's body disappeared over the edge above him. Everything was fine again. The three of them were together, and all were practically in one piece. He remounted his horse and caught the trailing reins of Pat's and Sam's mounts, rode down to the nearest point where the wall sloped enough for the horses to scramble out.

Pat and Sam greeted the big man with affectionate curses as he trotted up, and Ezra quickly related what

had happened to him since Sam rode away, leaving out a few details which he didn't feel it necessary they should know, and borrowing a sack of tobacco to roll a cigarette as soon as he finished.

They, in turn, introduced him to the strange gunman whom Sam had knocked unconscious in a fierce hand-to-hand fight after swarming up over the cliff, and who was just beginning to groan his way back to awareness of the tough spot he was in.

"The kid with the rifle that you chased off was Tad Grayson," Pat finished the explanation to Ezra. "He owns this ranch where Wackett pastured the herd of horses he bought from you an' Sam. But that herd of daid hawses in the canyon ain't the ones you an' Sam sold Wackett . . . not by a long shot."

Ezra almost strangled on a huge draught of tobacco smoke. "Not the hawses we sold?" he echoed. "Howcome?"

"That's what we don't know for shore yet, but we've got our idees." Pat turned to grimly survey the prostrate gunman, saw he was not yet in any condition to talk.

"The way we figger it," he went on to Ezra, "this feller an' Tad Grayson switched herds the minut yore hawses was turned out to pasture here. This feller has a man in Powder Valley that sent word up when Wackett made the deal with you an' Sam. They musta scoured the country . . . down into New Mexico, I reckon, for a herd of cheap no-good stuff, an' had 'em rounded up here in the mountains some place handy to make the switch when yore herd got here. Then they drove the good herd off an' turned those hunks of crowbait in to pasture in place of the good hawses.

"But the only way they could get by without gettin' caught was to have the no-good stuff die quick. They fed 'em somethin' . . . strychnine, maybe . . . an 'as

fast as they died rolled 'em into the canyon an' stretched 'em out careful so the wrong brands wouldn't show. That way, the scheme worked slick as a whistle. They couldn't repeat on it many times, maybe, but not many times would be enough to break old man Silas Wackett. He had lots of cash money, but he couldn't keep on losin' herds of fine hawses steady for very long.

"That was the way of it, I reckon, wasn't it?" Pat asked fiercely, turning to the gunman who had struggled up to a sitting position and was listening malevolently to Pat's deductions.

His reply was a volley of oaths. "I know who you fellers are, now. You two"—pointing at Sam and Ezra—"shot old man Wackett through the back when he jumped you about sellin' him a herd of sick hawses. Every gun in this part of the country is out for you. You ain't got a chanct to git away."

Pat strode over to him and stood looking down at the sitting man. He doubled his fist and drove it into the mocking smile on the man's thin lips.

"You killed Silas Wackett," he charged grimly. "You killed him because Wackett was beginnin' to get wise to the trick you an' Tad had played. I reckon Ringo had sent word from Powder Valley that Sam an' Ezra was headed this way, an' you knew damn well yore little game was up. You knew Sam an' Ezra would take a look at the dead stock . . . an' know they wasn't the same hawses they'd sold Wackett."

"Prove it," he was countered with a snarl. "Le's see you prove a word you've said."

"We could," warned Pat grimly, "have our own little private trial right here. We could be judge an' jury mighty easy . . . an' carry out the sentence without askin' permission from no one."

For an instant stark fear showed in the captured man's eyes. Then he laughed and shook his head. "I

He tried the owl-hoot once more, then pulled himself up to his knees in the moonlight.

Flame lashed at him from the cabin window and a bullet plunked into the ground less than a foot in front of him.

This wasn't any mere warning shot. That bullet had been thrown in earnest. No marksman alive would have dared aim so close at a human target in the illusive moonlight unless he hoped to cut the target down.

Pat held his own fire while he crouched there on one knee. Hell! he couldn't shoot back at Ezra. A lot of possible explanations for the one-eyed man's conduct flashed through his mind. Maybe Ezra had suddenly gone deaf and couldn't hear his signal. Maybe the big red-headed man had lost his sanity under the strain of hiding out from a murder charge. Maybe the saloonkeeper had managed to overcome Ezra, and it was Dad Cargat who was throwing lead from the cabin.

No matter which answer was true, Pat knew it was up to him to get to the cabin and find out.

He lunged forward suddenly, and another shot slammed out at him. He ducked sideways and forward, leaning far over to present a small target, trusting to the difficulty of moonlight shooting and his dodging tactics to carry him through unscathed.

He didn't count the shots that were poured out at him. It sounded like a continuous barrage, and he knew that Ezra must have gotten hold of a second gun somewhere to keep up that firing without reloading.

He dived headlong into the shadow the last twenty feet to the cabin, and rolled up to the base of it where a bullet couldn't reach him from the window, bellowing angrily:

"Cut out the shootin', damn it! This is Pat . . . from Powder Valley. D'yuh hear me?"

A surley voice inside the cabin growled, "From Powder Valley, huh? Whyn't you say so?"

A match flared inside the cabin, followed by a flood of yellow light from a kerosene lamp.

Pat dragged himself to his feet and holstered his guns. He limped forward to the door painfully, bruised by that last headlong dive to safety, getting some scathing cusswords ready on the tip of his tongue to blast Ezra with.

The door swung open in front of him. Pat looked into the leveled muzzle of a .45. Behind the gun was a man whom he had never seen before.

ELEVEN

BEFORE PAT could recover from his surprise and attempt to do anything constructive about the situation, the stranger lowered his gun and said gruffly, "C'mon in. I ain't seen you before, have I?"

"No," said Pat slowly. "No, I reckon you ain't." He strode forward into the small one-room log cabin. There was a built-in bunk along the rear wall, a pot-bellied stove and cooking utensils in one corner. His host wore twin gun-belts, and had the look of a man who would be fast with either gun. He wore black trousers tucked into the tops of short boots, and a black velveteen shirt buttoned up tightly about his neck. Thick black eyebrows, a hawklike nose and a cruel mouth gave his face a look of ruthlessness.

He pulled the door shut behind Pat, then went to a bare wooden table in the center of the room and turned the lamp down very low, demanding of Pat, "Why'd you make them fool noises like a damn hoot owl when you was ridin' up? If you hadn't jumped around like a

dang cricket I'd shore of drilled yuh." He showed his teeth in what he meant for a smile but which was more a snarl.

Pat's wits were working swiftly to make some sense out of this unexpected development. He didn't have any idea who this man was, but he couldn't forget the man had stopped shooting and opened the door when he said he was Pat from Powder Valley. It was evident that the gunman was expecting a visitor from Powder Valley.

And Pat was recalling, too, the queer way Tad Grayson had acted when the young puncher came with the story of finding this hideout. Tad had acted, by golly, just like Pat had acted—as though *he* knew who was in the cabin and wanted to get there by himself without sending a posse.

While these thoughts were flashing through his mind, Pat tried to think of a good explanation for his use of the hoot-owl call as a signal. He said lamely, "Well . . . uh . . . lotsa fellers use that call for a signal. You know . . . that's where the name 'owl-hoot trail' comes from." He laughed as though it was a good joke.

His host didn't laugh with him. He regarded Pat bleakly. "Didn't Grayson tell you the signal tuh use ridin' up here?"

"No. He . . . well, he's purty drunk. Too drunk tuh think of signals, I reckon."

"Then how'd you find yore way up here?"

"I was bringin' Grayson back from town when a young rider of his met up with us all excited about comin' on this cabin at sundown an' gettin' shot at. *He* thought it was them two killers the posses are lookin' for, an' was ridin' to get help. But I knowed it must be you . . . so I shunted him off . . . tol' him I'd come and check up personal."

Pat sat down in a broken-backed chair as he finished his glib recital of half truths and half lies. His companion nodded as though satisfied, complaining:

"This hideout is gettin' too damn public. When that kid rode up clost this evenin' an' I scared him off with a shot, I was afeared he'd bring a posse back with him. They ain't caught them two Powder Valley rannies yet, huh?"

"Nope." Pat shook his head. He busied himself building a cigarette, wondering how long he would be able to keep up this farce, and what sort of information he could get before he was discovered to be an impostor.

"Yo're a new man, huh? Well, what'd Ringo send you up here for? We cain't make no move here 'til them two men're strung up . . . the murder of Wackett writ down as a closed case. Ringo knows that."

"Shore he does," Pat conceded. "But he . . . well, he figgered I might help the sheriff some . . . knowin' I'm fast with my guns . . . an' that Sheriff Dillard ain't no great shakes runnin' a man-hunt." He wondered who the hell Ringo was, what connection there could be between a gang in Powder Valley and this gunman hiding out on Tad Grayson's ranch. Every answer to a question was like dropping a spark into a powder keg. The slightest hint of hesitation, or any mistake in guessing the correct answer to a single question would blow the keg right up under him.

"Gawd knows Dillard needs plenty of help," the black-garbed man grumbled. "The fat fool . . . settin' on his rump. I handed him his two killers on a silver platter . . . an' he *still* can't ketch 'em. Ringo's keepin' a clost watch to see they don't slip back into Powder Valley, I reckon?"

"Yeh. He's keepin' a clost watch."

"He'd better. They got a pardner down there that's hell-on-wheels with his guns, I've heard tell. Name of

Pat Stevens. If them three get their haids together, they're liabul to cook up some trouble."

"Pat Stevens, huh?" By not so much as the quiver of an eyelash did Pat betray the fact that the name was more than commonly familiar to him. "Seems like I've heard of him too." He laughed carelessly. "Funny thing . . . my name bein' Pat too."

"I bet you've heard of them three . . . if you've bin on the wrong side of the law very long. Nothin' funny about you both bein' named Pat. It's a common enuff name. The only funny thing'd be if yore name happened tuh be Stevens too."

For an instant, Pat's body went tense. His right hand lay loosely on his thigh, less than three inches from the butt of a gun. His fingers curled for a quick draw as he waited to see exactly what his companion meant by his last remark, but he relaxed when the man went on:

"Bein' as how yore name ain't Stevens . . . what is it?"

"That," said Pat cheerily, "would be tellin'." He leaned back and met the gunman's eyes with a cold inscrutable gaze.

"Tough, huh?" sneered the other.

"Plenty."

It was the challenge of Pat's two guns against the other's. Pat knew that if he was going to pass himself off as a member of a desperate gang operating outside the law it was time he called the other's hand. The only thing one gunman respects is another one who will stand up to him without fear. Already, Pat was certain in his own mind that here must be the murderer of Silas Wackett, and he was perfectly ready to shoot it out with him if the other cared to call his hand—though he didn't want to force the issue if it could be avoided. He had a feeling that there was a deep and sinister mystery surrounding the death of Silas Wackett,

and the only way to probe that mystery to its blackest depths would be to keep this man alive until more could be learned from him.

For a long moment the two of them sat there with their eyes boring into each other's. Any slight movement on the part of either, anything to break the terrific tension, would have brought blazing death into the small room, but neither was quite ready to start anything and so the moment passed.

The black-shirted gunman nodded and relaxed back in his seat. "Awright, so yo're a tough hombre. Killin' you to prove you ain't so tough wouldn't be a smart thing for me to do."

"It shore wouldn't be smart to try it," Pat growled, keeping up his pose as a gun-handy desperado eager to prove his ability.

"When this is ended I'll mebby take you in hand," the other said coldly. "You'd better git back an' lend a hand huntin' down them two Powder Valley hawse-traders. I ain't gonna breathe a easy breath till they're swingin' from a tree limb."

Pat leaned back and crossed his legs negligently. "No call for me to rush off in a hurry. I got another little piece of news you might be int'rested in hearin'. In Bleeker today there was talk of a couple of state livestock inspectors sent out from Denver to check up on Wackett's herd that died right after he bought 'em."

"State livestock inspectors? Never heard of nothin' like that."

"Yo're hearin' aboot it now," Pat reminded him equably.

The other cursed furiously, then said, "You'll have to tend to them if they get to nosin' around too clost. Who d'yuh reckon sent for 'em to come here?"

Pat shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know the ins an' outs of things here. But if I was you I wouldn't trust

that Tad Grayson boy too far. Wouldn't put it past him to've writ to Denver. He's almighty sweet on that Joan Wackett gal an' . . ."

"Yo're crazy! Tad wouldn't go back on us. Hell! he's in it deep as we are."

"I dunno. I wouldn't trust no feller that's still wet behind the ears when he's drinkin' rot-gut," Pat drawled. He watched the other slowly from under lowered eyelashes, saw the seeds of suspicion take root and begin to sprout in fertile soil.

"You'll have to keep yore eye on him too," the gunman grated. "Yo're right about too much whisky loosenin' a man's tongue. He's a fool . . . but he's bin useful."

"They tell me that Joan gal's mighty purty," Pat drawled with a slow grin. "I'm lookin' to meet up with her."

"You leave her be," he was warned in a snarl. "Mixin' up gals with bizness ain't so good. Let Grayson have her . . . she's all he'll get for his part when the pay-off comes."

"If she's as purty as they say, he won't do so bad," Pat suggested slyly. "Mebby I'll decide to trade with him. . . ."

"You'll take orders long as yo're workin' with me. 'Fore you go back . . . how about that kid puncher that I threw lead at this afternoon? Is he gonna make trouble so I'll have to pull up stakes from here?"

"Naw. He won't make no trouble. I'll go back an spin a yarn about findin' traces that Sam an' Ezra from Powder Valley have bin hidin' out here all right, but they've done gone before I got here. That'll fix things."

"You think fast an' straight," he was complimented. "Ringo did a good job when he took you in."

"I'm the bes' damn gun-hand this side of the Rio Grande," Pat boasted blithely. He ground out his ciga-

rette underneath his boot heel, stood up and yawned widely. "Guess I'll get back to Grayson's ranch an' grab me some shut-eye."

The figure in black arose and went to the door with him. "If you come out here ag'in, make a call like a jaybird . . . then you won't get shot at."

Pat laughed insultingly. "I ain't scairt of no man that cain't throw lead straighter'n you did at me tonight." He strolled out into the moonlight toward his horse which stood patiently where Pat had dropped the reins when he slid off over his head, and he knew he was leaving a worried man in the cabin behind him. It gave Pat a comfortable feeling.

He chuckled to himself as he mounted and rode off. He'd left a lot of questions for the black-garbed gunman to chew over in the solitude of his hideout. Pat had never heard the word "psychology," but it only took a little horse sense to know that when a criminal begins worrying something is due to break soon.

Now that he was beginning to get some of the hazy outlines of the operations of the criminal gang fixed in his mind, he knew it was something much bigger than he had anticipated.

The death of Silas Wackett was only a minor incident in the larger scheme. Yet he still couldn't understand what any of it was about. It was clear that some sort of a gang was operating in Powder Valley led by a man named Ringo, but that still didn't make any sense to Pat.

What connection could there be between such a gang and a herd of horses that died mysteriously after Wackett bought them from Sam and Ezra? How did young Tad Grayson enter into the picture? Was his first hunch correct and had Wackett been murdered to prevent Sam and Ezra from reaching him with

proof that the herd hadn't been sick when they sold it? Or had his death before their arrival been mere coincidence?

These questions and a dozen others chased themselves around and around in Pat's weary mind as he rode back to the Grayson ranch.

TWELVE

PAT STEVENS followed the trail down to the Grayson ranch without difficulty. The ranch house was a rough four-room affair, and the corrals and outbuildings were meager and dilapidated.

Joe strolled down to the corral from the house as Pat rode up. His round young face lighted up when he saw who the rider was. "I'm glad you come out of it all right," he told Pat sincerely. "Heard shootin' behind me an' I felt like a cur dog for ridin' off an' leavin' you alone. But me not havin' no gun . . ."

"Yeh," Pat told him placidly. "Everything come out all right. That was me doin' the shootin' you heard." He laughed shamefacedly. "Got nervous when I neared the cabin an' thought I saw somethin' move. I blazed away like a kid on the Fourth of July. But there wasn't no one in the cabin. Them two killers had skipped out . . . scared off, I reckon, by you when you rode close this afternoon."

"I'll put your horse up," Joe offered diffidently. "Your Mex pardner is fixin' chow in the kitchen. I can't savvy his lingo good, but I figure from the way he talked an' acted that you-all had been ridin' hard all the way from Denver without much to eat on the way."

"We been pushin' hard all right," Pat agreed. He turned the reins of his spent mount over to the lad.

"Don't give him much water at first, an' rub him down good. Then more water and a mite of oats. After that, a big feed of hay an' all the water he wants."

"Shore. I know how to take care of a trail-ga'nted horse."

Pat turned away from the corral and strode briskly up the path to the house. The front door opened onto a small square room that smelled of whisky and stale food. There was riding gear piled in the corners, and an oilcloth-covered table held tin dishes still dirty from the last meal eaten off them.

The smell of fresh coffee and the sizzling of frying bacon led Pat through a door into the kitchen. Still wearing his huge Mexican sombrero, Sam Sloan turned a dark scowling countenance to him from his skillet of frying bacon.

"How ees eet weeth you?" he grunted.

There was no one else in the small, hot, disordered kitchen. Pat parried Sam's question by asking, "Where's Grayson?"

"*Muy malo*," Sam grunted, indicating a rear bedroom with a jerk of his thumb. "I am put heem for bed," he amplified in what he fancied was a guttural Mexican accent, busying himself turning the strips of frying bacon with a long-handled fork.

Pat nodded and stepped close to Sam. In a whisper he hurriedly related what had happened at the cabin in the mountains.

". . . So that still leaves Ezra in the clear," he ended swiftly. "All we got to do now is find out who that feller is, an' who the hell Ringo is, an' what they're up to. . . ."

The tramp of Joe's bootheels on the threshold of the outer room interrupted him. He stepped back from Sam and went on in his normal tone, "My belly craves

somethin' that'll stick to my ribs better'n bacon an' coffee. I wonder ain't there no canned stuff cached somewheres aboot."

"Shore there is." Joe entered, answering Pat's question. He opened the door of a corner closet and showed them shelves of canned vegetables. "Pick out what you-all want," he offered hospitably.

Pat selected a couple of cans of corn and a can of tomatoes and handed them to Sam. "Mess them up together in a pot with some dry biscuits," he directed. "Joe an' me'll clean up them dishes in the other room."

"We'll jest stack the dirty dishes in the dish-pan," Joe suggested. "Ain't no need to wash 'em while we got clean ones on the shelf to eat off of. Me an' Tad don't wash dishes as a rule but once a week."

"Just you an' Grayson work the ranch?" Pat asked.

"Jest me, mostly. Tad don't do much 'cept to moon around Miss Joan."

"Runnin' a ranch like this is a purty big job for one man," Pat sympathized, seeking to draw the young puncher out.

"It ain't so much. The range is way understocked. Tad's been shippin' to market for years without bringin' in no new stuff to build up his herd. I dunno how he figgers to keep on goin' that way. He's got pasture grass knee-deep without nothin' to graze it down."

"I s'pose that's why Silas Wackett turned that herd of new-bought hawses from Powder Valley into Grayson's pasture instead of his own?"

"Yeh. You bet Silas Wackett never let none of his grass grow knee-high for want of stock to eat it down. He rented Tad's north pasture when he brought that herd of horses up from Powder Valley. The old man was allus givin' Tad hell for his shiftless ways . . . an' I got my idee that's the only reason Miss Joan ain't said

yes to his purposin'. Havin' a daddy that's one of the richest men in the state, she don't take so good to Tad's notions about ranchin'."

They had the table cleared of dirty dishes, and set with clean plates and iron cutlery. Mingled with the smell of bacon and coffee from the kitchen, now, was the savory odor of a bubbling pot of corn and tomatoes.

Pat pulled up a chair and said, "Set yorese'f. Pablo'll bring on the chuck when it's ready. He don't want no he'p in the kitchen."

"Yeh. Lotsa cooks are thataway," Joe agreed. "Makes 'em plumb wringy if anybody else bothers."

"What'd Wackett make most of his money off of?" Pat queried, his fingers busy building a cigarette. "Cow-stuff or hawses?"

"Cattle. He jest got bit by the horse bug lately. A few months ago he started traipsin' around the state buyin' up bunches of horses for cash money. Some of the dangdest bangtails I ever seen, he's bought an' drove in here."

"That so? I've heard he was mighty perticular what kinda stuff he bought. Like them hawses from Powder Valley that up an' died on him. Folks say they was mighty fine breedin' stock . . . that he paid a fancy price for them."

Joe snorted in derision. "Any man that called them horses good breedin' stock would figger he had somethin' fine if he crossed a jackass with a muley cow. I reckon the old man musta been slippin' in his old age . . . if he paid out *any* money for that herd of buzzard bait."

"Do tell?" Pat ejaculated. "Up Denver way we've heard tell that Sam an' Ezra in Powder Valley was raisin' some of the best hawses this side of Kentucky."

"Then they musta sluffed off their culls on Silas

Wackett," Joe declared doggedly. "Either that, or they went out an' rounded up a bunch of broken-down stuff and delivered them in place of their own horses. It was plumb stealin' to take a dollar of Wackett's money for that kinda stock."

Sam Sloan was halfway through the door from the kitchen bearing two tin cups full to the brim of scalding coffee. He stopped with an angry exclamation when he heard Joe's statement, and slopped some of the coffee on his hand. He let go of the cup with an angry curse, then dropped the other as it slopped on his other hand.

Joe looked up in mild astonishment as Sam went back to the kitchen for a rag to wipe up the spilled coffee. "Now, what got into him?" he wondered aloud.

Pat was choking with laughter inside. He knew the great pride Sam and Ezra had taken in the carefully bred and well-trained horses on their Powder Valley ranch; and he knew how Sam was fuming inwardly to hear Joe's opinion of the herd.

But he kept his face straight and said gravely, "You know how Mexicans are . . . flighty, sort of. He come here from Denver figgerin' on workin' on the corpses of some mighty fine hawses, an' he's upsot to hear you say they weren't so much."

Sam was on his knees in the doorway vigorously wiping up the spilled coffee. He glared up at Pat from under the wide brim of his hat, and made unintelligible sounds deep in his throat.

Pat grinned at him, then cleared his throat and went on pumping Joe for information:

"So, them fellers reely did put one over on Wackett, huh? Fust I 'd heard aboot the hawses not bein' much."

"Don't hardly nobody know that . . . 'ceptin' me," Joe boasted. "I ain't told it around any because Tad

warned me not to. The way I figger . . . the old man was goin' sorta crazy in his old age an' didn't know a good horse from a two-bit nag. Tad, bein' sweet on Miss Joan, was ashamed to let folks know how foolish the old man was gettin'. The reason no one else hereabouts caught on how he'd got stuck was because the horses started dyin' like flies soon's they got here. I'd been off ridin' circle an' got back two days after they was turned into Tad's pasture . . . an' half of them was already dead. Nobody much got a look at them 'cept me till they was dead . . . an' one dead horse looks jest like another one."

Sam came in with some fresh cups of coffee, then, and Pat dropped the subject for the time being.

But Joe's revelations had given him plenty to think about. In the back of his mind was forming a hazy picture of the sinister happenings that lay behind the murder of Silas Wackett. He didn't see, yet, just how the nefarious plan had been worked in its entirety, but he was resolved that the first job lying before Sam and him was to investigate the bodies of those dead horses thoroughly. If Joe's contention was correct—if the dead stock was in poor condition and worth, alive, only a small portion of the sum Silas Wackett had paid Sam and Ezra—then there could be no doubt that the dead stock was *not* the same herd Sam and Ezra had sold him; for Pat knew from his own personal observation that Sam and Ezra's horses were some of the finest ever raised in the state of Colorado.

THIRTEEN

PAT STEVENS and Sam Sloan bedded down in the front room that night on a pallet of saddle blankets and

covered with a dirty cotton comforter supplied by Joe from his bed.

They awoke the next morning to find a bleary-eyed Tad Grayson scowling at them from the foot of their bed.

Pat raised himself on one elbow and grinned at their young host. "How goes it this mornin', feller?"

"Who're you rannies?" Grayson growled in reply. He lifted a shaky hand to rub his unshaven chin. "I don't recollect ever seeing either of you before. Don't tell me I hired a couple of new hands last night."

"Not ezactly," Pat told him cheerfully. He hesitated. "Were you reely that drunk las' night? So drunk you don't remember nothin' aboot us?"

"I was plenty drunk. Don't remember nothing much." Tad slitted bleared eyes at Sam Sloan who lay on his back with the top of the comforter pulled up to his mouth. "What's the matter with your friend?" Tad demanded. "Looks like a Greaser from here."

Pat frowned portentously and shook his head at the young rancher. With frigid dignity, he warned, "It's right onhealthy to toss insults around thataway. This here is Dr. Pablo Gomez from Mexico City. Bein' of Mexican birth don't make a man a Greaser. Pablo's the smartest hawse doctor on either side of the Rio Grande, an' don't make no mistake. State of Colorado's got him hired to *in*spect sick hawses all over the state."

A flicker of suspicion showed in Tad's bloodshot eyes. "We ain't got any sick horses hereabouts."

"No, but you got a lot of daid ones that was sick before they died," Pat reminded him pointedly. "It's them we've come to *in*spect."

He yawned widely and threw the heavy cover back, showing himself and Sam fully clothed except for their boots and gunbelts. "We'll thank you for some break-

fast, an' then we'll clear out of yore way," he told Tad. "An' if you've got any idees about not makin' us welcome, now that you've sobered up, you better think again. We're here on official business, an' Sheriff Lem Dillard interdooced us to you right an' proper las' night."

Tad grunted a surly reply under his breath and turned away. He paused halfway to the outer door and turned slowly, his brow wrinkled in deep thought. "Things are coming back to me out of last night's haze," he admitted diffidently. "I remember riding home with you fellows, sort of, and seems like something important happened . . . can't recollect just what. Something about my rider, Joe. Seems like he came a helling with some story about finding them two Powder Valley murderers . . . and things just get black after that."

"You passed plumb out an' Pablo brought you back an' put you to bed," Pat filled in the gap for him. "Joe had passed an ol' cabin in the hills back of here and got lead throwed at him. You wanted to go by your own self to see what was what, but you weren't in no condishun to trade bullets with nobody, so I went in yore place."

Pat ended placidly as though that was all there was to it. He swung his long legs out from the cover and began pulling on his boots.

Tad waited expectantly for him to go on. There was a troubled frown on the young man's brow. Pat could almost hear the gears clicking at high speed in Tad's mind. He took diabolical delight in letting the young man worry, forcing him to ask further questions.

"And that's . . . that's what you did, huh?" Grayson queried after a full minute of silence.

"That's ezactly what I did," Pat agreed. He stood up

and swung weighted gunbelts about his waist, growling at Sam:

"Rise up on yore hind laigs, Pablo. We got *mucho trabajo this mañana.*"

"What *happened?*" Tad exploded.

"What happened where?" Pat countered innocently.

"At the cabin. The one where Joe thought the killers were hid out."

"Oh, there? Nothin' much." Pat waved his hand in light dismissal. "Seemed like Joe had made a mistake."

"You mean . . . it wasn't the killers at all? Some one else?" Tad's voice quavered with anxiety.

"The killers weren't there," Pat told him with finality. He left his explanation dangling like that so Tad would have something to worry about, turned to the kitchen, muttering, "I'll get a fire started an' coffee on. If you've got any hen-fruit about the place, me an' Pablo could put away a dozen or so."

Tad stood poised indecisively behind him, his jaw sagging open as though further questions were imminent, but he wasn't quite sure how to phrase them. When he found himself completely ignored, he turned with a sullen oath and went outside where he pumped cold water in a basin and doused his head in it.

Sam and Pat had cheery possession of the kitchen when he re-entered the house. He grudgingly pointed out a tin can full of fresh eggs, and Pat promptly fried all sixteen of them in hot bacon grease, loudly declaring that he and his Mexican partner needed sustenance for the job before them.

Joe came yawning out of his bedroom when breakfast was ready. The four men sat down together, and Pat and Sam began wolfing more than their share of the eggs in silence. Tad shuddered at the sight of food, and drank only huge quantities of strong black coffee.

He was obviously nervous and on edge, nerving himself to go on and question his two unwanted guests but not able to make up his mind how to start.

When Pat and Sam had finished breakfast in complete silence, they got up and Pat said:

"We're ready to take a look at them daid hawses now. Where at will we find them?"

"What do you want to look at dead horses for?" Tad asked desperately. "You can't bring them back to life."

"That's the law," Pat assured him sternly. "Like Sherriff Dillard told you last night."

"They've been dead for weeks," Tad protested. "They'll stink something awful. You can't ride closer than a quarter of a mile from that canyon where we rolled them without getting sick at your stomachs with the smell."

"We got strong stomachs," Pat assured him. "Where is that stinkin' canyon from here?"

"It's right east about two miles," Joe supplied for his employer when Tad hesitated, biting his pouched lips.

"It's on my property," Tad said suddenly. "You can't go traipsing around there without my permission. That'd be trespassing and I got the right to order you off."

"Go ahaid an' order," Pat suggested grimly. "See how far it gets you. We're lookin' at them daid hawses now. C'mon, Pablo," he turned his back and strode out the door. "We don't need no more directions from these fellers. Two miles east an' we had oughtta be able to foller our noses from there on."

Out in the early morning sunlight, Sam scowled blackly and said, "I don't understand none of this, Pat. What in hell are we gonna find out this way? We ain't even looked for Ezra yet. Why don't we ride out an' bring that two-gun hombre in an' settle things fast."

don't reckon you'll do that. Not you, Pat Stevens. You've done got respectable. Yo're a married man an' folks look up to you in Powder Valley. You've swore to let the law take its course."

"Lemme at him," Sam panted. "Let me an' Ezra han'le him, Pat. You kin ride on. You don't even hafta know nothin' about it. Jest mount up and turn yore back for ten minutes. We'll take care of this murderin' coyote."

Pat Stevens shook his head slowly. He muttered, "He's right, Sam. I cain't do it. Law's got to come to this country. You an' me an' Ezra has got to play the game square. If we don't do our part, we're as bad as him."

"That ain't gonna help none to Sam an' me if we get strung up fust," Ezra commented sourly. "The posse ain't lookin' fer you, Pat. It's easy fer you to stand aside an' shoot off yore mouth about the law takin' its course, but us . . ."

Pat said, "You don't mean that kind of talk, Ezra." Their gazes interlocked for a moment. Ezra's eyelids dropped first. He muttered, "No, Pat. I reckon I didn't mean that. Whatever you say goes with me."

"We're goin' to take this man in to Sheriff Dillard," Pat announced harshly. "I know we're right, an' I'm goin' to prove it." He walked over to their prisoner and nudged him with the toe of his boot. "Get up on yore hind laigs like a man an' step into the saddle. We're all ridin' to Bleeker."

Pat and Ezra took the lead on the trail in, with their prisoner following behind and Sam watchfully bringing up the rear.

In clipped sentences, Pat told the one-eyed man what had happened since Sam had left him.

"It all figgers out straight about the hawses," he ended calmly. "I'm purty shore Tad Grayson will break down

an' tell the truth when it's put up to him straight. I don't believe he had anything to do with shooting Wackett, an' he'll want to clear himself of that charge because he's in love with the old man's daughter."

"Then ever'thing will be fixed up good," Ezra exulted. "By Gawd, Pat, I knowed it'd all come out right as soon as you got here to take hold."

Pat shook his head. "Everything won't be quite all right even if we clear you and Sam of the murder charge. There's still a daid deputy sheriff in Powder Valley . . . on the Lazy Mare ranch. I reckon they've got a warrant out for me on that killin' right now."

"Shore, but they cain't blame you for that," Ezra muttered. "You had to do it. Hell! me an' Sam was tastin' the devil's brimstone until you blasted that deputy out of yore way an' kept comin'."

Pat sighed. "Two wrongs still don't make a right. I dunno, Ezra. I haven't let myself worry none about it up to now, but maybe I 'd better not ride into Bleeker with you. Might be best if you an' Sam rode in by yoreselves an' scouted around some. I don't aim to spend the rest of my life in jail for shootin' that deputy," he ended simply.

He swayed slightly in the saddle as he spoke, and his strong bronzed face lost some of its color.

Ezra caught his arm and exclaimed, "What's the matter? You gonna get sick now?"

Pat managed a wry smile. He muttered, "I lost more blood back in the canyon than I thought. Feel sort of fuzzy in my haid." They had come to the road following the creek around the Crooked Cross ranch, and the ranch buildings lay just ahead and to their left. He waved toward them weakly. "Believe I'll stop off yonder at the Wackett ranch an' rest a bit. You boys daren't stop. Take this killer on in an' turn him over to Sheriff Dillard. I'll be awright here, an' you can find

out how things stand with me on the business of that daid deputy."

He reined his horse aside, gripping the horn of his saddle to steady his swaying body.

Ezra nodded cheerily. "Get yorese'f a good rest. Me an' Sam'll settle this feller's hash for him, an' we'll be back with good news for you in a jiffy."

EIGHTEEN

JOAN WACKETT sat alone on the shady veranda of the ranch house. She felt more utterly alone than she had ever been before in her life. Losing her father by violent death had been a terrific shock to Joan, but now she had lost Tad also.

She had nothing left to cling to. Nothing, her grieving thoughts told her, left to live for. She didn't understand what had happened to Tad. She had turned to him, naturally, after her father's death. But he had become suddenly alien; a stranger. She knew he had been staying in Bleeker a lot—drinking. He seemed afraid of her; afraid to be alone with her.

Tad had stopped by yesterday on his way to town, and had made a lot of hints that surprised and frightened Joan. He wanted her to give up the ranch, move away to Denver or to some even more distant city. He suggested that she install a resident foreman to manage the ranch in her absence; even went so far as to say he had looked up a suitable man for the job and would bring him around to discuss terms with her.

Joan rebelled at that. She loved the Crooked Cross ranch and had no intention of deserting it for the city. She knew her father's affairs weren't in very good shape; that his last disastrous venture in buying the herd of Powder Valley horses and losing them had taken most

of his cash, but to Joan that situation was a challenge that made it more imperative than ever for her to stay on the ranch and continue to run it as her father had done all his life.

She and Tad had quarreled bitterly, and Tad flung himself away in a fit of sultry rage declaring that she was a fool and he was through with her.

Now, the next day, Joan had been sitting on the porch for hours watching the road from the Grayson ranch. She was determined to talk to Tad once more, attempt to reason with him for the last time. She would offer to marry him at once, she had decided dreamily, providing he would give up the foolish notion of going away.

When she discerned the movement of horses through the trees coming from the direction of the Grayson ranch, she sat up straight in her rocking chair with her heart beating faster. A spot of color burned in each cheek. If Tad tried to ride straight past, she was going to stop him. She didn't care how it might look. This was no time for maidenly coyness.

She saw there were four riders. Through the trees, it was impossible to recognize them. Two were riding abreast in the lead, the other two followed single file.

Her hands were clenched so tightly that her fingernails dug into her palms as they neared the point where a trail led off from the main road up to the ranch house. If Tad rode past without turning in—

Her heart stopped suddenly, then beat a flurried tattoo of happiness. One of the riders was veering away from the others, turning into the ranch yard.

Though she still couldn't see the man to recognize Tad, she knew it must be he. She presumed the other three were Joe and the two sick-horse inspectors from Denver whom she had heard about.

She turned her head modestly and pretended not to notice the rider's advance. She didn't want to wear her heart on her sleeve and let Tad know she had been watching for him.

She heard the horse coming forward slowly, heard the animal come to a halt some fifteen feet away. She waited to hear the jingle of Tad's spurs as he dismounted, for his voice calling to her.

She waited a full minute and nothing happened. She thought Tad must be stubbornly waiting for her to make the first gesture of reconciliation. She turned her head with a soft smile curving her lips.

The smile froze into a grimace of horror. The saddle of the standing horse was empty. The crumpled figure of a man lay on the ground beside his fore feet.

For a moment Joan thought it was Tad lying there. She leaped up and flew down the steps, calling loudly for someone to help her.

It wasn't until she was bending over Pat Stevens' lax body that she saw through her tears it was a stranger.

Men came running from the corrals in response to her call, and a neighboring ranch lady who had been staying with her since her father's death hurried out of the house.

Joan dropped to her knees and gulped back her sobs of fright. She was of Western pioneer stock, and the sight of blood was not new to her.

"He's been shot," she exclaimed briskly. "Here's two or three fresh wounds, and one on his neck that's scabbed over."

She moved back and directed two cowboys who had come running up, "Max, you and Bill carry him up to the porch. I'll get some bandages, and you see about some hot water, Mrs. Handly."

Under the young girl's calm supervision Pat was car-

ried up on the shady porch and his unconscious body stretched out on the floor. Joan came hurrying back with soft cloths and a butcher knife. With a steady hand she cut off his shirt and undershirt, then sliced off the rude blood-soaked bandages Sam had applied in the heat of battle.

Mrs. Handly brought a basin of hot water and disinfectants, and Joan shooed the cowboys away while she cleansed the wounds and dressed them with clean bandages.

Pat began to struggle back from the black pit of unconsciousness as she finished. His eyelids fluttered, and he began to call feebly, "Sally . . . Sally, darling. Don't go away from me, Sally. I need you. Don't go away. Come closer, Sally."

Joan took one of his lax hands and pressed it between her palms. She bent over Pat and answered quietly: "I'm here. Don't fret. Everything is all right. I'm not going away from you."

"You love me, don't you, Sally?" Pat muttered. "Gawd knows why, but you do. Say you do, Sally sweet."

"Of course I love you," Joan crooned like a mother reassuring an infant in her arms.

Pat's eyes came open suddenly. He stared up at the soft young face bending down close to him, then closed his eyes tightly, saying weakly:

"It ain't true. I won't have it be true. I'd think I was daid an' in heaven with angels hoverin' over me only I know dang well I ain't goin' to be headed in that direction when I die."

Joan rocked back on her heels and laughed soothingly. "Of course you're not dead. I'm no angel. I'm Joan Wackett."

"Joan Wackett, ma'm?" Pat kept his eyes tightly

closed while he remembered back to what had happened before faintness overcame him.

"Yes'm," he said humbly. "I know now. I reckon I musta talked right silly. I was dreamin' . . . sorta."

"About a girl named Sally?" Joan prompted him gently.

"My wife," Pat told her. He lay silent for a moment with his eyes closed, then tried to sit up, a red flush of embarrassment surging over his face.

"Doggone it, Ma'm, I'm plumb ashamed layin' here most nakid." He stretched out a long arm in search for clothes to cover his torso, but Joan merely laughed indulgently and pushed him back.

"You mustn't exert yourself and start your wounds bleeding again. You're already weak from loss of blood. Lie back quietly. I'm quite sure Mrs. Handly has seen men without a shirt on before, and I know I have."

A rider was galloping wildly up the road from Bleeker. It was Tad Grayson, his face ashen, his eyes wild with excitement. He flung himself off in front of the porch and came running forward, shouting:

"They've caught them, Joan. They've got the men that killed your father."

Joan leaped to her feet and went to the edge of the porch. Her skirts shielded the prone figure of Pat Stevens from the young man's eyes. "I'm glad, Tad," she exclaimed passionately. "Who caught them? How did it happen?"

"It was mighty funny. They came riding right into Bleeker bold as you please. They had another man with them, and they tried to claim *he* killed your dad. They claimed they'd been hunting him, but no one believed them. Funny thing about it, he's a friend of mine. Name of Leonard Barret. A horse trader that I've done business with. He's the man, Joan, that I told you about

yesterday. The one I advised you to hire as foreman when we get married and go to the city." Tad stopped to catch his breath, and Joan asked tensely:

"Are they sure the other two are the right ones? Do they have any proof?"

"All the proof in the world. Dad Cargat was there to identify them. One of them's been holding him prisoner all this time."

"What . . . will they do to them, Tad?"

"Hang them, I reckon. I . . . well, I didn't have much stomach for a lynching party so I came here to tell you."

"If I was in yore shoes," came Pat's grim voice from behind Joan, "I wouldn't have no stomach for that kind of a lynchin' party neither."

Tad let out a yelp of astonished fright. Joan stepped back and indicated Pat, said swiftly, "I forgot you didn't know. This man just fell off his horse in front of the door . . . badly wounded."

"Tad an' me have met before." Pat was sitting up. His eyes bored into Tad's. "So you turned tail an' left Sam an' Ezra to the mercies of a blood-crazy mob?" he charged. "Turnin' yore back ain't gonna help none, son. Yore conscience will never forget what's happenin' in Bleeker right now."

Tad Grayson stepped back a pace. He seemed unable to turn his eyes from Pat's accusing face.

"What is it, Tad?" Joan cried wildly. "What does he mean?"

"Tell her," Pat ground out between clamped teeth. "Tell her, you fool. Cain't you see she loves you? She'll understand an' forgive if you tell the truth in time to save two innercent men. But if you wait too long, boy, it'll be too late."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tad pro-

tested. "You sound crazy. You're the man who pretended to be from Denver . . ."

"That's right. One of the fellers you an' yore friend bushwhacked down in the bottom of that daid-hawse gully this mornin'. Some of these holes I got in me were made by bullets from yore rifle . . . tryin' to keep us from turnin' them daid hawses over an' lookin' at their brands."

Tad dropped his hand to the gun on his hip. Pat was wavering to his feet. He braced himself forward on the flat of both palms, pushed himself upward. His features were strained and haggard, his bandaged and nude torso gave him a fearsome look.

"Keep away from me," Tad warned desperately. "Don't go for one of your guns. I warn you. I've got the drop . . ."

Pat got his body in an erect position and began to laugh. It did not sound like human laughter. He moved forward toward the porch steps, his hands hanging loose at his sides. He kept on laughing though his features were hard and bleak.

Joan Wackett caught his arm as he passed her. "Please tell me what you're talking about," she begged. "You can't leave here in your condition. You're in no shape to ride. . . ."

Pat stopped laughing. His nostrils flared with pity for the orphaned girl. He said, "Ask Tad what I'm talkin' about. He knows who had a reason to kill yore father. I've been feelin' sorry for him because he let himself get dragged into somethin', but I ain't sorry for him no more. He's no better'n a murderer . . . ridin' away from Bleeker with a noosed-rope party makin' behind him."

Pat pulled his arm free from Joan's grasp. He stumbled once as he went down the steps, recovered his stride and stalked on evenly to his saddled horse.

No one tried to stop him as he swung into the saddle. It was like seeing the dead come back to life to see him lean forward in the saddle and drive spurs into his horse's flanks.

Then he was gone, and there was only empty silence behind him.

NINETEEN

OMINOUS SILENCE STALKED the dusty streets of Bleeker. There were no shouting crowds, no hoarse voices raised in jubilation that Bleeker was to have a hanging. Armed men were drifting into town from the range as word spread that the hunt was ended, the killers of Silas Wackett captured. They were grim men, worn and wearied with the search they had been pressing relentlessly since the night of Wackett's death.

The streets were slowly becoming lined with saddled horses and the saloons were crowded with quiet-voiced, unsmiling men who waited for the appointed time to come.

There was little heavy drinking among them, and no drunkenness. They were fully aware of the grave responsibility they were shouldering in taking the law into their own hands, and there was no boisterous rejoicing. The older heads were determined to see that the affair was carried off with due solemnity; that there was to be no carnival of blood-lust loosed in the streets of Bleeker. It was a job distasteful to most of them, a job that needed to be done.

There were few who saw a lathered horse bearing a half-nude figure gallop into Bleeker's Main Street. Those who did observe Pat Stevens' arrival were only mildly curious and paid him little heed. They supposed

he was a drunken cowboy hurrying to see the fun, and dismissed him from their minds. The lynching had been set for two o'clock, and it was fast approaching that hour. There were many preparations to be made.

Pat slowed his hard-ridden horse in the center of the main business block. His features were tight-drawn with pain, and the hard ride he had made had started his wounds bleeding afresh. His eyes blazed with a queer, greenish light, and he guided his horse in to a crowded hitch-rack by pressure of his knees only.

He let go the pressure of his knees when the tired horse nosed in to the rack. His limp body slid sideways in the saddle, then to the ground.

He lay there a long time without moving. Men passed by on the boardwalk two feet from him without seeing him lying there. The hot sun beat down on the splendid body, now pitiably weakened by loss of blood, and the pendulums of clocks all over Bleeker were inexorably ticking toward two o'clock.

After a long time of lying there, Pat stirred. He lifted his head, then his shoulders.

A shudder rippled through corded muscles beneath his white flesh. He slumped back prone again, but only for an instant.

There was a fierce driving need inside of Pat Stevens that would not be denied. He lifted his head again, and this time his fingers sought and found the support of a wooden post set deep in the ground to hold the hitching rack.

He dragged himself upward slowly. Men continued to pass by without looking at him, too intent upon the serious business at hand to watch the gyrations of a drunkard trying to untangle himself from the gutter and get to his feet.

When Pat stood erect he leaned against the post for

support and drew great racking breaths of sun-hot air into his lungs. His eyes were wide open and staring. They still blazed with a vengeful light.

He let go of the post and found he could stand alone. He dropped his hands to the smooth butts of his guns for a moment, and it seemed that his body drew strength from the contact.

He circled the hitch-rack and collided with two ranchers passing by. They looked at him curiously, but went on without speaking.

His burning gaze picked out the low swinging doors of a saloon in front of him. He forced his unsteady legs to carry him forward, lifting one foot and then another with extreme care, as though he were making his way through a roomful of eggs.

The bar of the saloon was crowded. Men stood pressed shoulder to shoulder. They weren't talking, and they weren't drinking much. They were waiting for the hands of the clock behind the bar to point to two o'clock.

No one looked at Pat when he forced the swinging doors open with his bare shoulders.

The bartender came forward languidly when he got up to the end of the bar.

Pat said, "Old Crow," in a hoarse whisper. The bartender uncorked a quart bottle and reached for a shot-glass. Pat got hold of the bottle with both hands and put it to his mouth. He held it there a long time, gulping earnestly, until the bartender turned and saw him, jerked it away from him with an outraged oath.

Pat said, "It's all right. I'll buy the whole bottle." His voice was clearer and color had come back into his face.

Men were beginning to notice him. They nudged each other and whispered questions, noting the bloody

bandages he wore in lieu of clothes over the upper portion of his body.

Pat paid for the bottle and took another long drink. He thumped the bottle on the bar and asked aloud, a question directed at every man in the room:

"Does anybody know where Leonard Barret is? The man that came in with the Powder Valley killers?"

No one answered at once. Then a squeaky voice piped up from far down the bar: "He's across the street at the Golden Eagle. They're drawing straws to see who'll pull the ropes tight."

"Tell him," said Pat, enunciating carefully to make each word count and conserve his strength, "that I'm comin' out into the street with two guns holstered. Tell him it's Pat Stevens from Powder Valley."

Every man at the bar was staring at him. A rustle of fierce questioning swept through their close ranks. Pat paid no attention to them. He lifted the bottle and drank from it again.

The little man with the squeaky voice slid out of the saloon and scampered across the street, breathless with excitement. He was back in a few minutes, announcing in an awe-struck voice:

"He says *he'll* be proud to meet up with you."

Pat nodded. He set the bottle down and turned to the door. Men flowed out in front of him, spreading away on either side to warn those unaware of the challenge that had been offered and accepted to stay clear of the street-space between the two saloons.

Pat walked slowly to the curb and stepped down into the street. Dust swirled up from under his boots. He planted himself on wide-spread legs to steady himself. His thumbs were hooked under his gunbelts in front.

Men were scurrying excitedly out of the saloon opposite, seeking points of vantage where they could safely

watch the meeting. This was a stage-setting familiar to many who watched. It was a scene that had been re-enacted in the West often. It was something that was bound to come while men wore guns and settled their differences that way. A throwback to "rapiers at dawn" and "pistols at thirty paces."

The West had its own stern dueling code. There were no seconds. No written rules. A gun on each hip —and God pity the man a split second too late on the draw.

Pat stood motionless with his bleak gaze fixed on the front of the Golden Eagle saloon. The swinging doors stood shut now. No one moved up and down the street. No one spoke. Many of the onlookers forgot to breathe as they waited.

The swinging doors across the street from Pat burst open suddenly to disclose a black-garbed figure.

He had a gun in each hand and they were smoking as he surged out through the swinging doors. There was a snarl of hatred and of fear on the gunman's face. He was beaten before he came through the doors, beaten by the mention of Pat Stevens' name and the calm stance of the wounded man who waited for him across the street without a quiver of nervousness or fear.

His bullets thudded into the storefront behind Pat. Fear and hatred are not attributes of straight shooting.

Pat crouched and his guns swept up. They replied to the burst of sound in front of him. His opponent pitched forward on his face and lay very still. Pat holstered his guns and in a tired voice said:

"There's the man that killed Silas Wackett."

No one spoke for a moment. Then men crowded close and began babbling questions with disbelief in their voices.

Pat tried to reply, but the weakness was upon him again. He swayed and went down to his knees in the

hot dust of the street. Someone shoved him and he fell forward flat on his face.

Angry hands plucked the hot guns from his holsters. A sinister rumble of anger welled up from the crowded street. Death had come to Bleeker and the latent bloodlust of the throng was at last aroused. There were angry shouts demanding that Pat be strung up with his two companions.

The men thronging the streets parted before the thudding hooves of two horses. Joan Wackett was in the lead, and behind her was Tad Grayson. A repentant Tad, his soul scourged with shame, but cleansed by the truth that had sprung to his lips when he confronted Joan after Pat rode away.

TWENTY

Sheriff Lem Dillard's office was crowded. Due to his weakened condition, Pat had been accorded the honor of the sheriff's own chair. He was flanked by Sam and Ezra. The dead man had been dragged inside and was propped up against the wall. Joan Wackett stood close beside Tad Grayson with her hand resting lightly on his arm. Her chin was lifted and there was a fierce look of loving pride on her face as Tad related the details of how he had let himself become enmeshed in Barret's scheme.

"He had it all planned careful," Tad explained in a flat monotone. "By the time the real herd reached my pasture from Powder Valley he had a corresponding number of horses he'd bought for from five to ten dollars apiece hid in the hills back of the pasture. We switched them that first night . . . and spread poisoned oat mash along the edge of the canyon for the culls to eat. They started dying the next day. It was plumb

awful." He shuddered at the recollection and wiped sweat from his face, but went on manfully:

"I'm not making no excuses for myself. I was crazy to do it. But my ranch hadn't been doing good and I was hard-up for money. We were to split the profit after L.B. had sold the Powder Valley herd down in Arizona." He paused for a moment to glance at Joan's taut face, then went on resolutely:

"I'm part to blame for Mr. Wackett getting killed. I knew L.B. was going to see him that night. I got Joan to ride away with me so L.B. could talk to Mr. Wackett alone. He was going to try to get him to make another horse deal like the other one. I don't know what happened . . . why he shot Mr. Wackett. I swear I didn't know he had done it. He made me believe these two men were guilty. I rode away from the Wackett house meaning to kill him. But he was a slick talker. . . ."

Tad Grayson's voice trailed off huskily. He squared his shoulders and went on: "I'm ready to take my medicine. Horse-stealing is what it was. You better lock me up, Sheriff."

Lem Dillard cleared his throat and glanced questioningly at Joan. "This here office ain't had no complaint ag'in you," he said meaningly. "I can't arrest a man without a warrant. Now, mebby if you was to put us on the trail of that herd . . . help us get 'em back for Miss Joan . . . mebby she wouldn't swear out no horse-stealin' complaint."

Joan's grip on Tad's arm tightened. Her smile was all the answer anyone needed. She said sweetly, "I've heard somewhere that it's the law a wife can't testify against her husband. As soon as Tad and I can get a marriage license . . . I won't be *able* to swear out a complaint against him."

Sheriff Lem Dillard snorted explosive relief. He fore-

saw an immediate return to normal inaction now that everything was being settled so amicably. He said, "Why don't you run along then, an' get that license?" and turned to the Powder Valley trio as Joan and her lover went out of the office together.

"There ain't no further charge ag'in you fellers neither," he told them significantly. "Nothin' to hinder you from hittin' the trail home."

Pat Stevens leaned forward slowly and asked in a strained voice, "Have you heard anything from the deputies you sent to Powder Valley to arrest Sam an' Ezra?"

"Nary a word. Not yet. 'Cept that they got there all in one piece. Pete Bemis sent word back the next day that he damn near foundered a hawse gettin' there that afternoon."

Pat nodded grimly. "I can believe that. Sam's hawse was plumb tuckered when he reached the Lazy Mare that night." He hesitated, then said quietly, "I reckon I'll let you an' Ezra ride back without me, Sam. Maybe I'd stay healthier longer if I don't go with you."

He turned his face away from Dillard and winked at his companions. "Tell Sally I ain't finished yet. Might take me a little vacashun to rest up. I'll send her word where she can find me."

An uncomfortable silence gripped them. Sam and Ezra knew Pat was thinking of the dead man left behind at the Lazy Mare ranch when he had refused to stay at home in safety while his friends needed him.

They both shifted their feet awkwardly and tried to think of something to say. It hadn't been Pat's fault. He had done it for them. Yet it looked as though he would have to suffer the consequences. They knew he wanted them to ride on and let him work it out his own way. He would simply disappear from Bleeker before word came back about the deputy's death.

They shook hands with him gravely and in complete silence in the presence of the sheriff.

Dillard didn't notice anything unusual in the handshakes. He thought they were just parting for a few days until Pat regained enough strength to follow them back to Powder Valley. He couldn't see that they were saying good-by to something that had been fine and good in their lives, that they were silently pledging Pat he would not be alone on the long trail leading away from the law. He had no way of knowing that the strong pressure of their hands assured Pat that they would hurry to Powder Valley and liquidate their possessions as fast as possible—then bring Sally and Dock with them wherever he might be hiding away from the law.

They filed out silently, and Pat grinned after them. He sat relaxed in the sheriff's chair with his eyes half-closed, toying for a moment with the idea of admitting the truth and giving himself up.

But he couldn't bring himself to take that step. The iron bars of a jail were not for his free spirit. He knew Sally well enough to realize she would prefer it the other way. He remembered her as she had bade him good-by. With his eyes closed he could hear her beloved voice assuring him passiontely:

"*. . . if things don't turn out right . . . don't you dare ride off without me, Pat Stevens.*" Then she had kissed him.

The memory faded from Pat's mind at the sound of a hoarse chortle from Ezra's lips. He looked up to see both his partners framed in the doorway. They were smiling widely.

Sam said, "We both dang near rode off without remindin' Sheriff Dillard he owes you a medal, Pat . . . *for killin' Ringo that night you left home.*" He extended a soiled sheet of paper to the sheriff. "I grabbed

Ringo's hawse that night, needin' a fresh mount to ride back on. This letter from Barret was in the saddlebags. Jest found it.

"I got to thinkin' as I walked out," he went on casually to Pat, "about me an' Deputy Pete Bemis damn near killin' our hawses gettin' to Powder Valley. Then I recollected how fresh that hawse was I grabbed. So, I knowed *he* hadn't been rode from Bleeker there . . . which meant that daid man couldn't be no Bleeker deputy. That wasn't the law that tried to stop us from leavin' the Lazy Mare. That was Ringo's gang . . . *an' you killed Ringo.* There's yore Powder Valley pay-off . . . *an' yo're comin' home with us to Sally.*"

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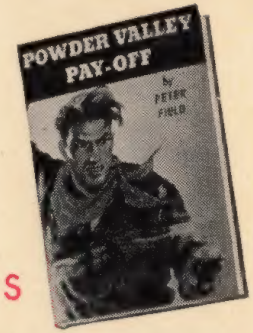

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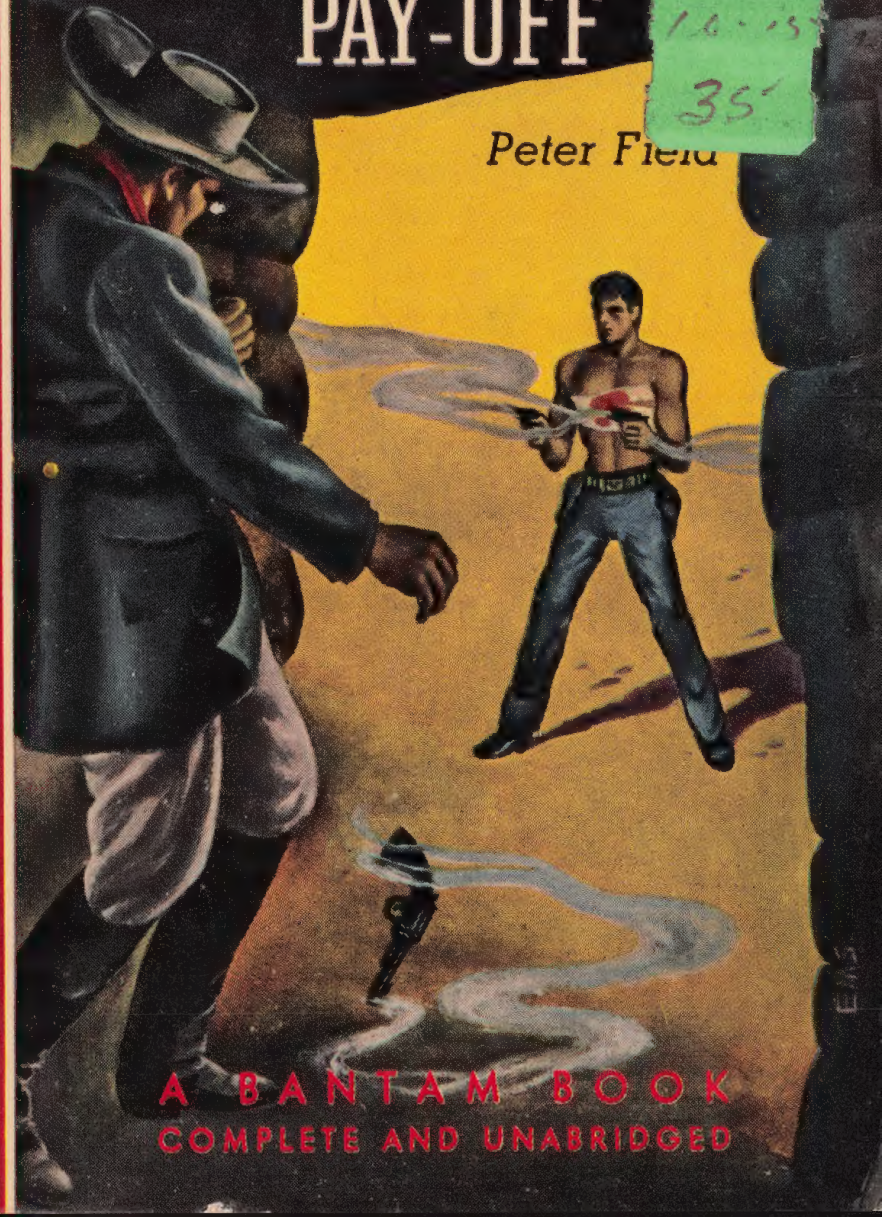

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